THE LAST UNICORN

PETER S. BEAGLE

"*The Last Unicorn* is the best book I have ever read. You need to read it. If you've already read it, you need to read it again."
—PATRICK ROTHFUSS, AUTHOR OF *THE WISE MAN'S FEAR*

Contents

Title
Dedication
Front Matter
Prologue
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four
Chapter Thirty-Five
Chapter Thirty-Six
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Chapter Thirty-Eight
Chapter Thirty-Nine
Chapter Forty
Chapter Forty-One
Chapter Forty-Two
Chapter Forty-Three
Chapter Forty-Four
Chapter Forty-Five
Chapter Forty-Six
Chapter Forty-Seven
Chapter Forty-Eight
Chapter Forty-Nine
Chapter Fifty
Chapter Fifty-One
Chapter Fifty-Two
Chapter Fifty-Three
Chapter Fifty-Four
Chapter Fifty-Five
Chapter Fifty-Six
Chapter Fifty-Seven
Chapter Fifty-Eight
Chapter Fifty-Nine
Chapter Sixty
Chapter Sixty-One
Chapter Sixty-Two
Chapter Sixty-Three
Chapter Sixty-Four
Epilogue
Backmatter

The Last Strike

Book 5
Of

The Last War Series

For my three favorite admirals: Kirk, Adama, and Ackbar

To be notified of future books in The Last War series, sign up here: smarturl.it/peterbostrom

Peter Bostrom is the pen name of Nick Webb co-writing with other authors. The Last Strike is by Nick Webb and David Adams.

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Other books by Peter Bostrom:

The Last War Series:
Book 1: The Last War
Book 2: The Last Hero
Book 3: The Last Dawn
Book 4: The Last Champion

Other books by Nick Webb:

Constitution, Book 1 of the Legacy Fleet Series

Mercury's Bane, Book 1 of the Earth Dawning Series

The Terran Gambit, Book 1 of the Pax Humana Saga

Other Books by David Adams:

Lacuna, Book 1 of the Lacuna Series

The Polema Campaign, Book 1 of The Symphony of War

Air Force One
Miramar Air Force Base
California
Earth

Three months after Jack Mattis's court-martial

President Edita Schuyler wasn't looking forward to the burning heat outside Air Force One. Ever since The Big One—an earthquake about a bazillion on the Richter scale—had torn up the state's land and oceans, the climate of San Diego was hot. Was *always* hot.

And yet the real heat was political. The city was an important battleground for her. She had to go out and go out strong.

Soldiers had their battlefields, and politicians had theirs too. Right now, this month, the good state of California was her Alamo.

And yet, her mind was somewhere else entirely: the upcoming meeting with Captain Jack Mattis. The infamous former Admiral Jack Mattis. They had debriefed and discussed Spectre and the Avenir, and now it was time to decide what to *do* about them.

The plan so far was to reach out to the Avenir and join forces with them. To give them Spectre—if they could ever find him. But what would that look like? Could they even—

"We need to make a comment on the transportation bill," said Vice President Jameson over the phone for the ten-thousandth time. "I know you don't want to do it. But the people need answers. You've got to talk to them, Edita."

She hadn't prepared a response. For weeks, all her attention had been devoted to the long-awaited meeting with Mattis. Above all, she needed a defensive strategy against Spectre and the unique threat that man represented to their world. She put another pin in her hair. "I know, Chris. My official comment is: we're still deliberating the minutia of the road funding." That wasn't true, of course, but it would do.

“Okay. And *un*officially?” An edge of… *something* crept into Jameson’s voice. Annoyance? Frustration? “We can’t keep stalling them. We *must* regain the initiative—take control of the narrative with this one. So what’s the *un*official position?”

“Unofficially, a bill with this kind of funding cuts isn’t just political suicide, it’s a political *suicide bombing*. If this thing passes, the blowback could take down the whole party—assuming the people don’t vote us out of office first.” She checked her hair again. It was fine. It had been fine before she started fiddling with it. Her stylist had done good work, but she always liked to do the last finishing touches herself. *Be* herself.

“But if we reject the bill,” said Jameson, “they’ll say we don’t care about the Avenir and this Spectre and the threat they pose, and that we would rather squabble about domestic matters. Lose-lose.”

Damn right. Lose-lose. “I know. So we’ve got to stall them as long as possible—until the midterms—and then we can hopefully flip a few seats and kill this thing for good. There’s no point having well-funded roads if an army of Spectres wipes us all out when he finally makes his move.” She sighed. “We’ll make up the funding shortfall in some other way.”

“Some other way,” echoed Jameson, skeptically. “Edita, you know we can’t just print all the money we like. We can’t inflate our way out of this one.”

Yeah, yeah. “There’s a way forward. I just need to convince the good people of California not to throw us out of office before I find it.”

Jameson snorted. “Yeah, a little speech is going to convince your average Californian to vote the way you want them to. Good luck.”

His lack of confidence was disheartening. She didn’t reply immediately, just glared at the phone.

“Sorry,” said Jameson, softening. “You know I have utter confidence in you. If anyone can sell sand to Arabs, it’s you.”

“That’s why I’m the president,” she said.

“That’s why you’re the president,” said Jameson, laughing. “Okay. A’right. No more doubting. Go. Knock ‘em dead out there.”

“Will do,” she said, and hung up.

As though waiting for the call to end, a knock promptly rattled the door, and she heard the voice of her chief of security: “One minute, Madam President.”

“Ok, Enrico.” Schuyler opened the door. “How do I look?”

He looked her over cautiously, then nodded. “Great. I still think you should be wearing a full-torso vest, though. Just in case.”

They’d been over this. Her protective vest only covered the middle of her chest; vests were available that covered almost the whole body, everything but the head and hands, but they were bulky. “I can’t,” she explained, patiently. “After that gun control debacle last month, I just can’t. It would send the wrong message. Like I’m *expecting* them to shoot me.”

Enrico conceded, raising his hands. “You’re the boss.”

She was. Schuyler clicked her tongue. “And Mattis… he’ll be there to meet me?”

“According to the satellite info, he’s on his way,” said Enrico. “Don’t worry.”

She briefly considered calling ahead to make sure, but she knew the security profile… and the call with Jameson had taken her whole flight anyway—as if pedestrian political bickering was more important than the fate of their entire species. “So. We have, oh, maybe forty seconds of free time left.” Such a luxury. “How are you doing, anyway? Has your wife had that kid yet? Feels like she’s been pregnant for two years.”

His smile grew. “Last week,” he said, somewhat sheepishly. “Another boy. Enrico number five.”

“Future voters,” said Schuyler, grinning a bit. “Make sure they register.”

“Soon as they can. Unfortunately...” he shrugged playfully. “Term limits still exist.”

“Laws are so bothersome, aren’t they?”

The intercom chirped, and there was instantly no more time for banter. “Popping the hatch, Madam President,” said her pilot, his voice straining through the tiny speaker. “Stand by to disembark.”

With Enrico, she moved to the front of the ship. The outer door hissed faintly as it de-sealed, letting in the scorching hot air. Like opening an oven. Dammit. It was so hot.

Enrico opened the door for her and she stepped out. The hot air hit her like a wall. But she ignored it, waving and smiling to the crowd who’d turned out to meet her. Thousands of people… how long they had been standing on the tarmac, melting in the scorching heat, was anyone’s guess.

Cheers went up. The crowd was smaller than she expected, naturally, but it was hostile territory after all. Schuyler smiled wider, stepping down the metal steps. The railing was too hot to touch, but she forced herself to.

Down the stairs, across the tarmac, then toward the crowd, a mass of people held behind concrete barricades.

"Looks good," said Enrico in her earpiece-radio. "Chang, Peterson, check left. O'Reilly, Lu, check right. Rest of you, five point formation. Standard deployment, ladies and gentlemen, you know the drill."

Of course the protestors were there. Of course they were. She observed them out of the corner of her eye. Three or four times the number of people here to greet her, angrily waving signs.

Feed The Needy Not The Greedy

Cut War Not Welfare

Austerity Kills Children

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Bunch of whining hippies, thinking Spectre would give up just because someone made a sign. Schuyler looked straight ahead and stepped confidently up to the nearest clump of supporters. Crowds were always in clumps. People were like that. Or maybe the Secret Service had arranged them that way after vetting. She could still see their barricades and their metal detectors at the edge of the tarmac.

"Welcome to Cali, Madam President!" shouted someone, hand outstretched. She took it and shook firmly. "I voted for you!"

"Thank you," she said, smiling her best smile. "Vote early, vote often. Thank you." Then she moved onto the next outstretched hand and shook it as well. "Thank you, thank you. Thank you for your vote."

A dance she'd done a thousand times. She walked from clump to clump, hands reaching out for her. Each time she picked one at random.

Another hand. "Thank you," she said, shaking it. "Thank you."

"Good luck in the midterms!" someone shouted. "You can do it!"

She could. Another hand. Another shake. Security jostled her. "Thank you, remember: vote early, vote often."

Another hand. Shaken. Another. Shaken. Another. Shaken.

Another, holding a handgun pointed right at her.

She stared down the barrel mutely. It looked like another hand, but it was not. Disguised. Flat. Made out of some kind of synthetic polymer. Before she could do anything, say anything, it discharged.

Time slowed. The slide slowly jumped back, expelling a shiny brass shell casing. Fire leapt from the muzzle, a tongue of flame and smoke. Someone punched her in the side.

Another shot, seemingly to no effect.

Another.

Time sped up again.

Screaming.

“Get down, Madam President!” Enrico grabbed her, dragging her down to the ground, shielding her. He drew his own pistol, eyes scanning for the shooter. “Code red! Active shooter!”

Her team swarmed around her, forming a protective barrier of suits, weapons drawn. They were shouting things. Looking for someone to shoot. She couldn’t see from the ground.

The crowd of supporters scattered, shrieking and yelling, but the press remained, snapping photos. Damn. How would this look, her laying down on the ground, cowering behind her security staff?

“Is it a protester?” barked one of her staff. “Who’s got eyes?”

It wasn’t. She craned her head, trying to find the shooter, but Enrico pushed her back down.

“No, Ma’am! Don’t. Stay low.”

“I wanna see,” she protested, feeling his knee on her back. “Dammit, you’re hurting me.”

“Stay down!” Enrico shouted. He never, ever shouted. His eyes looked her over, just like he had before, but this time his widened in alarm. Panic. “Shit. Shit! Medic!”

Medic? She wasn’t hit. “I’m fine,” said Schuyler. The hot tarmac, baked by the sun, was stinging her. “Let me up.”

Enrico ignored her order. “Medic! Need a medic over here!”

One of her other staff stood on her foot, breaking her shoe-heel. Men were all around, crowding in. This wouldn’t do. She’d had enough.

“I’m fine!” Schuyler growled, roughly shoving Enrico off. She clambered back up to her feet, unbuttoning and pulling open her suit jacket. “See? I’m—”

Blood.

The first bullet had pierced her hip, just to the left of the edge of her protective vest. Enrico had been right, of course. The second one—she hadn’t even felt it—had poked a hole in her chest, missing the armored plate by less than an inch. The third... there was too much blood to tell.

“Oh shit,” she said, and then, as though on cue, the pain came. Searing. Burning. Her knees suddenly felt weak and, gracelessly, she slumped back down to the ground.

“Medic!” shouted Enrico, and distant sirens grew louder all around her. “The president has been shot!”

“I’m fine,” she said, a tremble in her voice. There was a lot of blood. “I’m fine. It’s fine. It’s going to be okay.”

She fought to keep her eyes open. Enrico injected her with something. Everything went… fuzzy. They were trying to save her.

“I’m fine,” she kept saying, and every time she said it, it was a little bit less sincere. “I’m fine.”

Things went even blurrier. Distant. She was loaded into a helicopter. A medical helicopter. More injections. Consciousness came and went.

Enrico held her hand the whole way to Sharp Memorial Hospital.

“How could a breach like this happen?” Enrico kept asking. “I want to know. We checked the protesters, we checked everyone. How could this happen?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, as they wheeled her into emergency surgery. “I’m going to be okay. Enrico? Where’s Enrico?”

“Yes, Madam President?” He had been beside her the whole time. Of course he had. Damn…

Her lips felt so dry. “Call Emma. Wake her up. I wanna give a speech... when I’m out of here. Make her write me a good one. We’ve got to get the transportation bill… killed.”

“You got it,” said Enrico. Now, suddenly, he had surgical scrubs on. “I’ll make sure it’s a good speech. Don’t worry.”

“Great,” she murmured, as they pumped the sedatives into her body, preparing her for whatever operation they were about to do. “Don’t forget. Good speech. It’s gotta be good.”

“The best,” said Enrico.

Emma was the best. It would be a good speech. She felt the sedative flow through her, listened to the beeping of the machines and the nervous, concerned chatter of the doctors around her.

She was fine. She was going to be okay.

And then there was nothing.

Chapter One

San Diego Field Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation
San Diego
California
Earth

Special Agent Denelle Blair sat at her desk holding a small, white envelope in her hands. It contained a letter from her superior, Special Agent Peter Miller of the FBI, director of the San Diego field office. The letter that would determine her future. It was marked *TO BLAIR, DENELLE (APPLICANT)*.

Had she finally been transferred off-world? Was it happening? Who even sent a *physical letter* in this day and age?

"Oooh, is that the letter?" asked her colleague, Bert Dowling, a big, annoying, dopey look on his face. "Doesn't look good, Blair. When you're accepted, they send you a big Manila envelope. When they reject you, you get the little white ones. That's what happened to me. Big Manilla one for transfer, little white one for rejection."

Why did Dowling *insist* on being a total bastard at any and all places, times, and opportunities? She scowled at him. "How do you know they didn't just run out of the big Manila ones?"

"Yeah." He snorted like the big fat pig he was. "The FBI ran out of *approval* envelopes."

Angrily, Blair tore open the envelope and yanked the letter out.

Dear Special Agent Denelle Blair,

We have received your application to transfer to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's intergalactic division. We have received a large number of applicants this year, and unfortunately we were unable to accept all of

them, despite many strong applications. Your application has not been selected. We thank you for your consideration, and hope—

Blair scrunched up the letter. Dammit, Dowling. Why was he so frustratingly right?

"Bummer," said Dowling, a pleased smile spreading on his face.

Piece of shit.

"Look," he said, letting the smile fall away, replacing it with something almost approaching sincerity. "Maybe you just need a big case to get their attention, you know? Something to make them notice you."

She sighed and smoothed out the crumpled letter, sliding it in into a desk drawer. "Maybe."

"Next big case that comes along, I promise. You can take point for it. No matter what it is." Dowling waggled a thick finger. "When something big happens, you'll get your ticket outta here."

"Nothing ever happens here," grumped Blair. "Just petty crime. Nothing *big*. Nothing *exciting*. I'm going to be stuck at this desk forever."

"Next big case. Promise."

She didn't believe a word he said. But right at that moment, her communicator chirped. Her news app. Out of a mixture of frustration and boredom, she scanned the message.

PRESIDENT SCHUYLER ASSASSINATED IN SAN DIEGO WITH CHINESE STEALTH GUN

This would go straight to the director's desk. No doubt about it. But if Schuyler was really dead… there was bound to want someone to take point in San Diego until they arrived. Someone to do the initial ground work. Find a lead. A suspect. Something she could grab first, with both hands, and not let go.

"So," she said, fighting to keep the excited tremble out of her voice. "The, uh… next big case, huh?"

Dowling put his hand mockingly on his chest. "Promise," he said.

Her grin became a mile wide. "Great," she said, "because I have just the one…"

Chapter Two

Del Mar
California
Earth

Meanwhile

Captain Jack Mattis squinted in the bright Californian sun as Elroy drove through the endless traffic, cars on his left and the ocean on his right. Ever since the autopilot had broken down, the trip had turned into a nightmare. *No worries Captain,* Elroy had said. *I'll do it manually.*

Captain… he hadn't held the rank of Captain in many years. But it wasn't as bad as he had expected. It was the process of being demoted that hurt. All he had done was tell the truth. All he had done was fight for humanity. All he had done, he had done for his country—his species.

And now his son was dead. He knew the courts had been somewhat merciful, despite the unfounded allegations, but he simply couldn't shake the feeling that they had looked at what he had done and simply said, "thanks, but no thanks."

Still, there was some relief. He was going to meet the president in person to discuss a plan of action; an honor, surely, but he felt woefully unprepared. They had exchanged words at Commander Pitt's funeral, but it was different to be asked to brief her. It would have been nice of her to hold the meeting in D.C., but apparently "security was a concern".

Empty cans of energy drinks and cold coffee rattled in the back seat, clunking against the sidearm in the footwell. He raised his arm to shield his eyes, the sting of the action causing his fingers to twitch.

They should have flown, the air-traffic lockdown be damned. His shoulder ached when he moved it, having endured three surgeries now and counting; a dull reminder of the value of following proper medical advice.

And of his son's death.

Chuck, pinned under the debris of a ruined warship's corridors, hadn't seemed to have been in pain, despite his injuries. He'd even smiled. *Hey, Dad. If I don't get out of this, tell Elroy I love him, okay?*

Those hadn't been his final words, though, fitting as they were. Instead, it had been a simple phrase. One he'd said as Mattis extended his hand to pull him out.

I got you.

The voice of a son trusting his father. A father who had let him die.

That thought would be with him until the day *he* died.

"You okay?" asked Elroy from the driver's seat. The car's wheels clattered as they crossed an old, coastal railway track, its engine humming quietly as it trundled toward their destination. They'd driven from Baltimore, sleeping in the car and taking turns driving after the autopilot had died, but now that they were close, it was impossible to rest any more. His legs were tired. He needed to get out.

"Yeah," he said, "I'm fine. I just wish we didn't have to drive."

"I know. But, well, money's tight, and since Goalkeeper locked down orbital *and* atmospheric traffic except for military use, it's cheaper to rent a car for a week than it was to fly two people both ways."

This was true. Still. Two and a half days sleeping in a moving car with his dead son's husband had not been kind on his old bones. "Well, when I finally get up there, after we talk to the president and the space-travel lockdown's lifted, I'll make sure to make an exception for you."

"Well," said Elroy, stifling a pronounced yawn. "That'd be super keen, dad."

Dad. He still wasn't used to that. Elroy had said it before, but even so, it was something that took a lot of getting used to. They hadn't discussed it, or planned it, instead it was one of those things that had just happened. The way he said it was obviously sincere. Elroy was really trying to get closer.

"I haven't really slept much this whole trip," said Mattis, fighting the urge to yawn. "How about you?"

"Oh, a bit," said Elroy, with a little smile. "Chuck and I used to do road trips whenever we could. And when the money was there. Just for the fun of it, you know?"

"Ah," said Mattis, his heart sinking. How many times had Chuck sat in this seat? Looked right across at Elroy like this?

Suddenly he felt vaguely stupid. Chuck had never sat here. It was a rental. He'd even been present when it was rented. Mattis was imagining things… letting his mind play tricks on him. A stupid, old, tired man.

"Anyway. It's been good to share this with you." Elroy smiled again, in a way that seemed slightly forced. Unnatural. "I know things have been busy since the funeral. Sorry about that."

The car's HUD chirped as it pointed out that they were getting close to Miramar Air Force Base. Mattis scowled slightly as Elroy pulled past a white, flat structure set back from the road. Miramar's Naval Consolidated Brig. Where he was almost imprisoned.

"Not as sorry as I am." Mattis kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead, ignoring the military prison as best he could. He had come so close to being locked up in there. Best not to think about how that might have gone. "Let's keep going. Too bad we won't be able to catch a shower before we get there, because… boy, you stink."

"And you stink too." He smiled. "So I guess we're even. We're definitely going to need a shower before we meet President Schuyler."

Elroy smiled. "Who can tell at this point?"

He considered. "Demotions aside, I'm still an officer. I might be able to get hold of a shower when we arrive."

"That sounds good," said Elroy, smiling again.

Ahh, that smile. A smile Mattis had been seeing a lot of. The kind of… *hey, I know your life sucks right now, but I'm trying to be nice smile.*

"Okay," said Mattis. "Just pull in at the gate. Maybe try the autopilot again."

Elroy tapped on the screen and the car chirped its acknowledgement, then emitted a dull *bloop*. Still broken.

"I feel," said Mattis, cautiously, "that I should be trying to make you feel better."

Elroy sighed and looked out the window. "Maybe. But I didn't just go through what you went through, you know? War and… that. I've had more time to work through this—through what happened to Chuck."

"We've had the same amount of time," said Mattis, still hesitant.

"Well it's more than that. At the funeral, I promised Chuck that I would be there for you." For him? That was… unexpected, given their history. "I know we haven't exactly had a perfect relationship. I know you didn't

exactly approve of Chuck and me. Probably still don't, on some level. But that's okay. Right now I'm here for you."

Mattis smiled. "Thanks, Elroy."

"No worries. Honestly, I just love helping people. That—that helps me in a way."

Mattis settled back into his uncomfortably familiar seat. "Well, there's nothing wrong with that. And it's like I've always said… you just gotta always do what you can, with what you have, today. It's a good piece of advice I feel, to do with all things. Just… do what works for you, and if helping me is going to help you, then by all means."

"That makes sense," said Elroy, nodding. "Kinda what I've been doing already, just… with less fortune-cookie wisdom to back it up."

Mattis snorted. Fortune cookies…

"What?"

"Oh, it's an inside joke." He smiled to himself. "During the Sino-American war. We captured a Chinese transport ship full of supplies for the war effort. They came out of Z-space right on top of us, must have had some kind of malfunction or something. Pretty nice haul… ammo, medical supplies, you name it, all taken without firing a shot. Biggest thing they had was these huge shipping crates full of fortune cookies. Literally hundreds of thousands of the things, all with the little…" he snickered. "The stupid little sayings in them, you know? Like, oh, hey, *your day will be full of joy*, or *your wife is cheating on you*, or whatever. The funny thing is, fortune cookies were actually invented in California ages ago, they were just really popular in China at the time, because they saw them as American capitulation to Chinese culture, and—"

The car took a turn, swerving as it suddenly crossed two lanes of traffic to pull into an exit lane away from the base.

"Whoa," said Mattis, glaring down at the console. "What the hell was that?" He looked at Elroy. "Did you turn the autopilot back on?"

"No," said Elroy, wide-eyed. "Did you?"

"From the passenger's seat?" Mattis frowned. "No."

And yet it *was* on. The car tore away form Miramar, accelerating along with all the other auto-driving traffic. 90km/h. 100km/h. 120km/h.

"Holy shit," said Elroy, gripping the Jesus handle. "What's going on?"

Their car split off from the other traffic, peeling into a side street. Ahead, flashing lights and wailing sirens marked a police blockade.

“This isn’t good,” said Mattis, as the car slowed down, trundling to a stop just in front of a dozen police officers with guns drawn.

“Get out of the car!” shouted one of the officers, pointedly clicking the safety off her rifle. “Now! Show me your hands!”

What the *hell* was all this? Obediently, Mattis raised his hands. “What seems to be the problem, officer?”

Two police officers moved forward, cautiously, pistols out. They grabbed his arms, twisting them behind his back, igniting a burning pain in his shoulder.

“Captain Jack Mattis,” said the officer, forcing him down onto his knees, “you’re coming with us.”

Chapter Three

Naval Consolidated Brig, Miramar
California
Earth

To Patricia “Guano” Corrick, the days in the brig were beginning to blur together.

Regular strip searches. Showers with lice-killing agents. Guards performing suicide checks and contraband checks and cell integrity checks and checks for things she didn’t understand—didn’t even care to understand.

The only thing that changed with each day was the order and frequency of the events. Each existed in a static environment; everything else was the same, and with the random events excluded, each day was functionally identical to the last.

Bright orange prison garments, way too big and baggy, made her look like a penguin with stubby little legs. She lived in a tiny cell with a steel door and a metal slit. She used her three possessions: cup, toothbrush, and toothpaste. She examined her face in a metal mirror, washed said face in the sink, used the attached toilet. The food was, somehow, even worse than military food. Random aromas wafted from the toilet.

Day by day, week by week, month by month. Inspections came, inspections went. Meals went into her mouth and went out into the toilet. She felt like some kind of food-poop conversion machine, serving no other purpose.

It was bleak. It was terribly boring. Yet she didn’t complain. She had been dragged out of the *Stennis* before it exploded. Bratta and Modi had, apparently, taken her down with some kind of dart device. She didn’t remember it at all. She barely remembered anything after… after she had taken the baby. That was something she could not forget.

So she knew she deserved to be here. She'd told them everything. Now her home was the brig.

Probably forever.

However, before forever had a chance to arrive, something finally *did* happen that broke the monotony of it all. Guano didn't know what day it was or what month it was. But her cell door opened well before it was supposed to, and suddenly a man in a suit stood on the threshold of her cell. He was tall, broad, and had a military bearing. He wore a Navy uniform, but he was also carrying a black briefcase. Odd.

"Lieutenant Corrick?"

Guano stared at him in bewilderment, unable to process the idea of someone coming to her cell. "Yes?"

The man pulled out a small business card. "Willis Turvey. Judge Advocate. I'm your lawyer."

A lawyer? No. She hadn't needed a JAG in the trial, and she didn't need one now. "Okay," she said, a palpable tiredness suddenly coming over her. "But I deserve to be here. Thank you for your time. Sorry I wasted it."

"Actually," said Turvey, his tone suggesting that he was expecting exactly that response, "it's not a problem at all." He paused, looking over his shoulder at the guard, then back to her. "Sorry, can I come in? It's a bit awkward to just, you know, stand here. I've got something very important to show you."

The idea of someone coming into her cell was actually a welcome one. The only other people who'd been in there during her imprisonment were guards. And suddenly, she desperately didn't want this guy to leave.

Quick self-check. Do you really *want this guy to stay or leave? Is it really… you?*

It was. "Sure," she said, shuffling over on her cot. "Come in. The accommodations are incredibly spartan, but you can enjoy the ambiance of the toilet, or even get some mostly-fresh water from the sink, if you want." She gave a tired, forced smile. "Prison's great."

Turvey, to his credit, laughed and sat down beside her, pulling his briefcase into his lap and opening it with a soft *click*. "Okay. Well, I might pass on the sewer gas, and also on the mystery water. But I do have this for you." He produced a thin manila folder, labelled *CTSCAN-CORRICK, PATRICIA.*

She craned her head. "What's this?"

He opened the folder, revealing a greyscale scan of her head. “The crew of the *Caernarvon* took this while you were unconscious. They were worried that Mr. Bratta’s invention might have deprived your brain of oxygen. So they scanned your head to make sure.”

She hadn’t realized they’d tested her, as she had simply woken up in the brig. It made sense, though. Of course they had. “Did they find the crazy bit?” she asked, blithely.

“Actually,” said Turvey, pointing to a grey splotch, circled in red. “They did.”

Guano squinted. The cloudy area was tiny—or rather, several tiny smudges so close together that they seemed like one big smudge. “It looks like just a… thing.”

“It *is* a thing,” said Turvey. “You see, people were asking questions. Before the—the incident where—”

“Where I shot Flatline and Roadie,” said Guano, the words bitter on her mouth. “Where I killed my CO and best friend. Yeah?”

“Y-Yeah.” Turvey stammered slightly, before regaining his composure. “Yes, that. Before that your service history wasn’t perfect, but you were a good pilot. You followed orders. You’d been in and out of combat, with no signs of Combat Stress Reaction. In fact…” He pulled out another document. Typed up. The name at the top said *Mohammad Yousuf.*

Roadie.

Turvey began to read. “Lieutenant Corrick’s resilience is unparalleled. Although she has been in the thick of some of our most violent engagements and even lost friends, her tolerance for the rigors of combat is among some of the best I’ve ever seen. She is obviously affected by it—how could she not be?—but courage is not the absence of fear. Instead, Corrick understands the pain of losing her friends, understands the danger she’s in, and in this high-pressure environment, thrives. Therefore, despite the occasional reprimand which I stand by, it is my sincere pleasure to recommend her for promotion to O-4, and assigned to the role of DCAG, effective six months from the date of entry.”

Roadie had wanted to make her Lieutenant Commander, his second in command? Her chest ached. The last thing he had ever seen was her pulling the trigger to end his life… so a promotion was probably off the table, then.

“So?” said Guano bitterly, unable to look at the report. “So what? He’s fucking dead. I killed him. Pretty sure I won’t be making O-4 when the

investigation concludes. Pretty sure I'm going to rot in here forever, and that's exactly what I deserve."

"Is it?" asked Turvey softly, his face blank. Cryptic.

"Yes!" spat Guano, shuffling on the hard cot to face him properly. "I shot my CO, a Marine Corps Major in good standing, on a distant world and left him to die. I then went and *stole* a freaking *baby* and gave it to an enemy of the United States of America. Pretty sure they used to shoot people for that."

"And yet," said Turvey— he leaned in, emphasized every word—"the woman who did that is at odds with the woman described in this report." He pulled out another piece of paper. "Or in this one, from your gunner, Junior Lieutenant Wiley. Or from any of the other numerous reports I've read. And from the preliminary hearings—"he relaxed back into his seat, hands behind his head—"It is my understanding that you have not yet presented a justification for what you did, only that you have confessed to the crimes you have been charged with."

"Right," said Guano. "Because I'm guilty."

"That is beyond doubt. The only question is *why*." Turvey smiled slightly. "Lieutenant, it is my firm belief that you were not yourself when you committed these crimes."

"Right," she said again, frustration mounting. "Because I'm cray-zee. Loco. Batshit." The implication of it started to settle in. Guano… batshit. Eerily prophetic.

Turvey shook his head. "No, no. What I mean is: you were *literally* not yourself." He pulled up the CT scan again. "These lesions were found in your prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain just behind the forehead. It normally supports higher-order capabilities such as strategizing, categorization, and prioritizing. Now, I'm not a medical doctor, but I have it on good authority that damage to this area can cause not only confusion and disordered thinking, but even psychosis under the right circumstances."

"It wasn't psychosis," said Guano, her mouth drying up. "It was… I was awake. I just couldn't… I just felt my hands doing things that I didn't want them to, you know? And I couldn't even—couldn't even *say* anything. It was like…" She put her hands in her lap. "You know when you go and open up the fridge by habit, yeah? And you're just left there, staring, like *why the hell did I even do that?* It's like that."

“That,” said Turvey, his eyes lighting up, “is exactly what could be observed if these smudges are what I think they are.”

“And what’s that?”

“Nanobots. Tiny machines.” Turvey pointed to the CT-scan. “Little tiny bots that release extremely precise, extremely controlled doses of dopamine and other chemicals directly into your brain.”

She narrowed her eyes skeptically. “You think little robots in my brain are controlling me? Like… some kind of puppet?”

“Nothing quite so precise,” he said, “but in a way, yes. Controlled in the same way that humans *without* these devices develop things like unconscious habits, nervous ticks, or brainstem reflexes. To put it another way, you don’t think about your heart beating and can’t stop it if you tried. This is the same mechanism, sort of, but *way* more advanced. The human brain is, after all, one big chemical reaction.”

“Okay,” said Guano, cautiously. “If that’s true, then…why did they stop? Why haven’t I had another episode since I got locked up?”

“There are always limits to technology. I assume, in this case, the range of these things is pretty limited—they are quite small, after all. Or, because they’re so tiny, the bots can only harvest a small amount of chemicals at once, and have to store them up. They probably have a set of pre-programmed urges within you, and then new instructions are sent as needed.” Turvey took out another photograph. It showed a strange device, small and metal with an antenna. “This was found in the wreckage of the *Stennis*. The computers couldn’t place the technology as part of the ship, and it doesn’t appear to originate from any known nation.”

She recognized it immediately. “I put that there,” she said. “During one of my fugue states.”

“EOD thought it was a bomb. Wanted to dispose of it with semtex, but fortunately Intel wanted to see what they could learn and had it x-rayed and cut open.” He paused. “It’s not a bomb. It’s a radio relay—for your nanobots, presumably.”

“Right.” It made sense. But something else didn’t. She scowled. “How did those things get into my head anyway?”

“Well, most likely during your time in that tank. It seems like the most logical opportunity. We’re still investigating.” He carefully placed the photographs back in his briefcase

She ran her fingers through her hair. “So you’re saying that when I shot Roadie, when I shot Flatline—”

“You weren’t yourself.”

Guano hesitated, then sighed. “Okay. So, if this is true, so what? What use is it?”

“Who knows.” Turvey snapped his brief case shut. “I’m not about to promise anything. All I need is your approval to look into this.” He stood up briskly and adjusted his suit coat. “Surely it’s worth investigating, isn’t it?

Some part of her knew that it was, and yet, she hesitated.

Roadie was dead. Flatline was dead. Someone had to pay for that, and *she* had pulled the trigger.

“Fine,” she said, releasing a long, low sigh. “Do what you need to do.”

“Okay.”

Turvey signaled the guards and left her cell. She was alone again with nothing but her thoughts.

When they gave her the callsign Guano, her wing had probably never *actually* considered that she would spend the rest of her days in a military prison. Or maybe they had.

Either way, she doubted Turvey could accomplish anything meaningful. She was stuck here. Guano’s eyes drifted back to the steel sink, slowly panning around the four walls of her cell, her new home. *Did* she deserve to be here?

For the first time since waking up in the place, some tiny part of her dared to wonder whether she might actually see the outside of it.

Chapter Four

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
Outer reaches
Tiberius System

Captain Pippa Spears drummed her fingers on her command chair impatiently. “Is that them?” she asked for the second time. “I want an ID on that ship.”

“Working,” said Blackwood, typing furiously. “Sensor data is limited at this range.”

The monitors flashed warnings as the ship powered up its Z-space engine. The vessel was little more than a pixelated, grainy mess at this distance, but the *Caernarvon*’s sensors could hardly miss the massive build up of energy that signaled the completion of a Z-space translation.

“Dammit all!” Spears felt her fingers involuntarily tighten around the armrest in frustration. “They’re going to get—” In a bright white flash, each monitor washed out, and when the glow faded away, there was nothing left but empty space. “—away.”

A tense silence flooded the bridge.

“My apologies, Ma’am,” said Blackwood, sighing and straightening her back. “And the results are in: the ship’s computers estimate that there’s only a six percent chance it was the Aerostar.”

Why did they run, then? she mused, slowly running her fingers through her hair. Although there was a potentially obvious answer, there were so many scavenger ships out there, smuggling ships, mercenary ships… ships that would have every reason in the galaxy to ignore their hails, power up their Z-space engines, and leap away from a Royal Navy ship showing interest in them.

“It appears I need a bigger ship,” she muttered. “Or at least a hint as to where those blasted Reardons have gotten to.”

“We could,” said Blackwood, her tone gilded in hesitation, “try Mattis again. He might know.”

Naturally. She acknowledged the possibility that Mattis might have some kind of indication where those slippery ne’er-do-wells had gotten to with their CIA officer friend, but—“No,” she said, with all the finality she could muster. “We’ve discussed this, Commander, and I won’t be leaning on the good captain unless we absolutely have to.” Her voice softened. “He’s been through enough already.”

“Aye aye, Ma’am.” Blackwood seemed to want to say more, but protocol stopped her.

A good CO always leaned heavily on their XO. Spears always had time for Blackwood’s council. “A word in my ready room, Commander? Wouldn’t mind briefly chewing the fat with you on this.”

“Of course.” Blackwood’s relief was clear. “I’ll put a kettle on.”

Spears stood, turning to her communications officer. “Mister Locke, you have the bridge.”

With protocol observed, the two women went into Spears’s spartan but functional ready room. Blackwood made her way to the black and red kettle beside the sink in the tiny kitchen, flicking the switch. It immediately began to hum.

“Very well,” said Spears, folding her hands behind her. “Seems like you’ve got something to say, Commander.”

“I do. Permission to speak freely, Captain?”

Well, now *this* was an unusual request. Blackwood, although a proper officer, was usually not hesitant about speaking her mind. “Granted,” said Spears.

Blackwood shuffled her stance, obviously cautious with her words. “What are we doing out here, Captain? This Aerostar… these Reardon brothers. Why are we hunting them?”

It was time. Blackwood needed to know. Spears chose her words carefully. “As you well know, in the aftermath of the battle against the *Stennis*, the *Aerostar* was hanging around like a bad smell. We knew what they were—smugglers and scavengers, low-life space trash, but they had helped us and we were grateful. However, our systems detected that they decided to—ahem—acquire a piece of the wreckage. They had it for a couple of hours, then when we scanned it, it powered on. No American system I know of does that. It must have been… not ours.”

“Right,” said Blackwood. “And the Reardons must have detected the scan and gotten spooked, because they executed a Z-space translation before we could even talk to them.”

“And I want to know why. Why did that piece of tech just … turn on, when we scanned it? American technology doesn’t have a habit of doing that, unless they’ve got something up their sleeve I’m now aware of. And when the Reardons saw it turn on, why did they turn tail and run?”

“They’re smugglers, ma’am. Lowlifes. Why wouldn’t they run?”

“Something doesn’t add up for me.” Spears shook her head. “There was something odd about that piece of tech. From what we can tell, it was just a computer core. Not even the Stennis’s main computer. But … it just … turns on? And the Reardons make a break for it when it does? No. Something’s off.”

Blackwood didn’t seem convinced. “It could have been anything, Ma’am,” she said. “Any number of pieces of military equipment would sell for quite the sum in Chrysalis, or any of the scummy places in the galaxy. Who knows.”

That she could not contest. “I think it’s the *Stennis*’s main backup computer. It matches the size and weight. There were plenty of valuable things floating around that they could have stolen, but…” she clicked her tongue. “Backup or not, whatever they took, it made them *scared* when it turned on. Smugglers and scoundrels rarely get frightened. I want to know what can do that.”

“Hmm. It’s your call, Ma’am.”

Spears nodded firmly. “It is. And I want to talk to the Reardons about what they found. If it turns out to be nothing… well, at least we’ve maintained the combat readiness of this ship with a few drills.”

“Then we definitely need Mattis’s help,” said Blackwood. “We’ve been out here for weeks, chasing down every single blasted ship out there without a transponder, or with an improperly filed flight plan, or just… seemingly searching anyone who crosses our path.” She gestured to the door, and through it, to the empty black sea of nothing. “Is this your plan, Captain? Just stumbling around randomly, *hoping* that amongst the hundred thousand or more ships out there, that *one* of them is a very specific ship with a very skilled crew who really, really, *really* do not want to be found?”

That, she conceded, was a difficult position to defend. “I understand,” said Spears, cautiously. “But I’m not sure what else we can do. We don’t

know if Captain Mattis is able to help us at all, and the poor man needs all the time he can get. He's earned it, Blackwood. First his ship, then his son…"

"I'm cognizant of his losses," said Blackwood, evenly. "But face it, Captain. We need help."

"That we do." She paused, considering. "The *Caernarvon* is ship-shape and Bristol fashion, her crew as well, but… we can't fight the whole galaxy by ourselves, can we, Jemima?"

Blackwood, to her credit, just stood there at ease, hands behind her back.

"Fine," said Spears, blowing out a low sigh. "But I don't just want Mattis. He might have escaped prison, but there's one member of his crew that didn't."

"You want the pilot?" asked Blackwood, frowning slightly. "The *Caernarvon* carries shuttles, Captain. Not strike craft. What good is she?"

"She," said Spears, the seed of an idea forming in her head, "might well be crucial to this endeavor."

Blackwood nodded firmly. "I'll make the call."

"Actually," said Spears, "it's probably best if I do it myself. Be a dear and plot a course to Earth."

Chapter Five

San Diego
California
Earth

For Mattis, the ride in the un-air-conditioned rear of the police van all the way to the San Diego Police Department was the longest, hottest, most uncomfortable, and most confusing drive he'd ever experienced. And it wasn't just the heat or the tightness of his handcuffs.

The police officers had read him his rights and explained the situation. President Schuyler was dead. Apparently. And only hours before she was due to meet with him. Because of that, he was now a 'person of interest'. Detained for questioning. Not quite accused, but not quite free either.

He couldn't believe Schuyler really was dead. There had been so much to discuss… it didn't make sense. Unless the meeting was connected somehow.

Maybe Elroy would have some insight about this. It was strange to think that, having just spent two days locked in a moving metal box with him, being driven by a computer across the continental United States, he wouldn't treasure half an hour alone. Yet, all he wanted was *someone* to talk to. Someone to puzzle over this development with. Someone to help him work through it.

Suddenly, he missed Modi. He missed Lynch. He even missed Captain Malmsteen and everyone he'd ever had the pleasure of serving with or under. He wanted to get back into the field, into space, and talking to the president had been the first step in that process.

But, evidently, that was going to have to wait.

The van came to a halt, slowly but with enough force to make him rock to the side. All was quiet, save for occasional muttering from the driver's compartment.

The heat picked up. More than before. Without the motion of the van to help cool the metal, it was turning into a sweatbox fast.

“Hey!” shouted Mattis. “How about letting me out of here, huh? It’s gotta be a hundred degrees!” Silence. Frustrated, he swung his foot out and kicked the side of the van. “Hey, c’mon!”

The door unlatched and swung open. Cool air—or at least, cooler air than the baked atmosphere of the inside of the van—rushed in, and the sun’s glare made him squint. Eight police officers crowded the doorway, rifles pointed straight at him. Behind them, Elroy was there, still cuffed, flanked by two SWAT officers.

“Out,” said an officer.

Mattis complied, shuffling forward and out of the van, awkwardly dismounting with his hands cuffed behind him. Two policemen grabbed him, flanking him like they had done with Elroy, marching the pair of them off toward the loading bay.

They were lead into the rear of the station, all eyes on the two of them. Mattis kept his back straight and his posture upright. He hadn’t done anything wrong, and wasn’t about to present the notion that he had.

Mattis suspected, for a moment, that he was being led to the holding cells—probably a step up from the brig on the various ships he’d been staying in before the trial—but instead, he was taken to booking, straight to the front of the queue. They recorded his personal information—name, date of birth, service number—and then they took a photograph and a DNA sample. His pockets were emptied, his body roughly searched, his rights were repeated to him and then he was lead away.

He thought he would be taken to holding, but instead went straight to a room labelled *Interrogation*. Elroy was led away somewhere else. Holding, most certainly, or possibly another interrogation.

Interrogation. Not a good word. Mattis took in the place with a cynical eye. The small, stark room was featureless apart from a waist-high table, three chairs, and a one-way mirror pane that took up most of the far wall. Mattis was placed in the single chair, opposite the glass, and his cuffs were attached to the table magnetically.

“This is a bit much, isn’t it?” he asked the guard, dryly. “Do you know how old I am?”

“I know who you are,” said the guard.

Before he had a chance to argue the point, the door swung open again and a tall woman with a badge around her neck stepped into the room, taking the seat opposite him. She had a stony demeanor, obviously trying to compensate for her glaringly young and pretty face. She scowled at him from under her cropped blonde hair spiked up with gel.

"I'm Special Agent Denelle Blair," she said, flashing her bronze badge. "FBI."

He looked at her skeptically. A single rookie agent in a *police station* sent to investigate the assassination of the POTUS?

She appeared to read his thoughts: "The agency's got their own leads to follow up, and for now you're my job." She idly glanced over her shoulder at the one-way mirror, then zeroed back in on him. "I'll be assisting the local police with the matter." She smirked. "Don't look so surprised, it's happened before. After JFK was assassinated, the Dallas police had a big role in the immediate aftermath until the FBI formally took over the investigation. I'm here now and you'll be dealing with me. That's all you need to know for now."

He blinked at her. "Right."

"Do you know why you're here today?"

"Because you made a really big mistake," Mattis said, shaking his head. "I'm Captain Jack Mattis, US Navy. I didn't shoot the president. I've been driving across the country for the past two days and didn't even know she was dead until my rights were being read to me."

Blair's lips curled into a small smile. "I don't believe the cause of death has been made public yet," she said, letting her badge fall back to her chest, the gesture carrying with it an edge of triumph.

It was a logical deduction. "Presidents are always shot," Mattis shrugged. "It's basically the only way anyone can get past the Secret Service. Which I didn't do."

"You sure seem to know a lot about how to kill the president," Blair said.

Mattis sensed more than anything else that Blair really had nothing to go on. If she had evidence, she would present it. "You know it's a glaring logical fallacy to suggest that just because I had an appointment to discuss __"

"I don't know *what* you were going to discuss." Blair's tone was even, almost too even. Forced, perhaps. "I'm just trying to figure out what you

were doing there."

This was getting him nowhere. Mattis leaned forward. "Check the logs on Elroy's rental," he said. "The systems will show that our car was traveling from Baltimore to San Diego immediately before I was arrested, and that I was inside the car for the entire duration—right up to the point when those fine officers dragged me out. As was Elroy. The stink of two days worth of travel on us is more than testament to that, as is the food and drink in our vehicle—which I'm sure you've inspected by now. Furthermore, neither of us have guns and neither of us were anywhere near where she was killed. Yes, we had a meeting with her, but if you don't have any witnesses, anything *tangible* with which to hold us, I am asking to be released."

Blair considered, seemingly unmoved by his explanation. "The President of the United States is dead. I'm not about to let you go because you're smelly." She sighed. "Come on. The president of the United States is shot dead by an unknown gunman in San Diego the *same day* you're scheduled to have a nice long chat with her in a back-channel meeting. We *did* check the logs on your vehicle—the autopilot was disabled for most of the trip, until after the shooting, meaning we have no logs of where exactly you went. You were also traveling with a firearm, which forensics is working to match with the gun that killed the President… you, a Captain in the US Navy, recently dragged through a court-martial. Someone who went on TV and rambled about future-people to the galaxy. That's a motive. You can't tell me it's a coincidence."

"I have no idea if it's a coincidence or not," said Mattis, simply. "The autopilot was disabled because it was malfunctioning. A cursory look at the car will tell you that. The firearm is standard—don't you believe in the second amendment?—and the President didn't court-martial me. She had absolutely nothing to do with it. To be perfectly candid, I think the odds of it being a coincidence are… extremely remote. But that's not the issue here. The question you should be asking yourself is: did Elroy kill her? Did I? And clearly, obviously, no. We're not suspects, we're persons of interest. We're here to help you in any way we can."

"And how is that?" asked Blair, shifting slightly in her seat. "How can you help me?"

Mattis tried to raise up his hands in a shrug, but the handcuffs around his wrists stopped him with a clatter. "You tell me. But unless you can come

up with a *concrete* motive, something more than speculation, and means as to why I might have killed the President, you should treat me as an ally, not a suspect."

She paused, obviously mulling it over. Weighing it up. Letting it turn over in her head.

"Where did you get the stealth gun?" she asked.

"No idea what you're talking about," said Mattis. "Stealth gun?"

"A pistol that doesn't show up on metal detectors. Suspected to be of Chinese manufacture."

"Never seen one of those in my life." Mattis raised an eyebrow. "The firearm you found in the back seat of the car… was *that* a Chinese stealth gun?"

"No." Blair went back to thinking. "No, it wasn't, but you could have easily ditched the real weapon."

He could have, but why? "If that was so, why wouldn't I ditch the other gun, too?"

Silence. More consideration from Blair.

Mattis pushed a bit. "I think it's obvious you're grasping at straws here, so lemme lay it out for you; if you push this, I'll demand a lawyer. You have to give me due process. The case gets turned over to the military court, with all the resultant paperwork shuffling and delays. Back and forth, back and forth, and we waste days and weeks and *months* sitting here in this very room as my lawyer constantly says things like *you don't have to answer that question,* and things like *I'd like to request a three day recess to investigate this claim*. Your boss and coworkers find out you detained a world hero, a veteran, hoping on some level they will immediately confess, but their stories check out, and Elroy's statement will match mine, because we're telling the truth. My lawyer will file a wrongful arrest lawsuit because you had armed men pull me out of a car without probable cause; which will be easy to win, given we can cross-reference satellite data and toll information. You know how it goes. And all the while, Edita's real killer goes to ground, burns their trail, and maybe even gets off-world… or even out of the system."

"Why do you think they'd do that?"

He shrugged. "Because I don't need to be *FBI* to realize that's the smart play here. That's what *I'd* do. Plenty of places for a wanted assassin to

disappear into in the world… Chrysalis, Tiberius, anywhere. And every second we spend here talking makes that much more likely."

"Mmm." Blair picked at her teeth, feigning disinterest. But Mattis knew she had nothing.

"Release me, and do the same to my son-in-law." Mattis twisted his wrists, raising up his hands as close to a shrug as he could manage. "Or I'm done."

"You're done," said Blair, ominously, "when I say you're done."

"Up to you," said Mattis, sitting back in his uncomfortable chair. "Unlock the cuffs, or I start demanding my constitutional rights, and we're going to be in this room for a *very* long time."

Blair considered, then sighed, leaning over the table and unlocking his handcuffs. "Okay," she said. "Start talking. And you better make it good."

Chapter Six

Naval Consolidated Brig, Miramar
California
Earth

Guano, alone once more in the timeless, empty void that was her cell, patiently waited for her environment to change.

Another inspection would come pretty soon. Or yard time. Yard time! Her heart picked up at the notion of breathing a little air outside of four walls. A little exercise and the small shot of endorphins it would bring… and the sun. Seeing the sun would be nice.

But until then, she had to wait. Guano closed her eyes, willing time to pass, falling into the only way she'd been able to let the moments slip by. She'd tried a lot of things—yelling, doing pushups, writing a book… but nothing seemed to work except the daydream. A rehearsed script, almost. Like a consciously imagined fantasy.

A fantasy about flying.

Guano's cold, steel prison seat became a pilot's chair; she held her fingers where the instruments would be. She could practically hear the whine of engines as she opened the throttle. She had taken off from the *Midway* so many times that she could construct it perfectly in her mind. The gap between the hangar doors, the landing lights, the takeoff procedure. She pressed the buttons, whispered the radio calls to herself, and her imaginary fighter tore out of the hangar and into open space.

A normal spaceship was constrained by limitations—the restrictions of the laws of physics and of operating government property. Fuel, flight plans, rules of engagement… but in her mind, none of those things applied. In the vast, unending space field she imagined, her ship could make any maneuver, could travel at any speed, could visit any stellar phenomenon.

She flew out to the rings of Saturn, letting the ship cruise above the thin belt of ice, rock, and dust. Such a maneuver would be highly dangerous in

real life—the front of the vessel would be shredded in minutes, and one slightly-too-large rock could easily smash through the canopy before she would even have time to see it. But in her mind's eye, everything was safe and wonderful and—

"Hey, Corrick!"

A guard's voice snapped her out of her daydream. He was standing by the open door of her cell, communicator in hand, glaring at her. He'd probably called a few times.

"Sorry," she said, mumbling slightly, her mood dampening instantly as the reality of prison rushed back to her.

"It's fine," he said. "Thought you might be having a stroke or something."

Some part of her figured he might not actually enjoy that outcome—as though his concern was somehow genuine, only lathered over with 'tough-guy guard' attitude. "No, no," she said. "Nothing like that. Just daydreaming to pass the time." Her eyes flicked to the small device in his hand. "What's that?"

"You got a call," the guard said. He gently extended the device through the bars. "Real important one."

They were going to *give* her a phone? In her cell? Surely not permanently. Skeptically, Guano reached out and took it. "My, uhh…lawyer was just here." Why would he call right away? How long had she been daydreaming?

"Not a lawyer," said the guy.

"Who is it, then?"

He only pointed to the phone.

Okay. She put the communicator to her ear. "Hello? This is Lieutenant Corrick."

"Hello, Lieutenant Corrick," said a woman—a voice stiff with a crisp efficiency, but twinkling in just a glint of humor. "I imagine you're happy to hear from me."

British. For just a moment she feared it was *him*, but it couldn't possibly be. Guano wracked her brain to place the voice, but was finally forced to give up. "Sorry, who is this?"

"This is Captain Spears of the Royal Navy. Commanding Officer of the *Caernarvon*." A ship she had fought alongside. It seemed like a lifetime ago now. "How are you faring?"

It felt so strange to suddenly receive a call from a British naval Captain that honesty poured, unbidden, out of her. “Shit, Ma’am,” she said, flatly. “Military prison is no joke.”

“Of that I am certain.” She paused, obviously considering her next words, a faint hiss the only noise on the line. “You know I did everything I could.”

Of course. Spears was the one who had sent a statement, surprisingly gracious on her behalf, to her trial. And probably one to Mattis as well. Suddenly, all the memories rushed back into her head; yes, Spears had tried to help her. Still… “A helpful piece of paper doesn’t really do much when you plead guilty.”

“No,” said Spears frankly. “It doesn’t. And especially not when you choose to have no lawyer, and especially not when you plead guilty and practically *beg* to be locked up. But that’s neither here nor there. I wanted you to know that I tried.”

Guano lifted the device away from her ear, stared at it, then put it back. “Is—is that why you called?”

“Oh, goodness no,” said Spears. “I’m returning your lawyer’s call.”

For a moment, Guano couldn’t process what she was hearing. It made *no sense*. Maybe she was dreaming. It had happened before… she had fallen into her flying daydream and nodded off. But this felt very real. “I didn’t call you,” said Guano.

“No,” said Spears, patiently. “You didn’t. Your lawyer, Mister Turvey did. The man owes me a huge favor and now, I’m cashing in. He’s arranged for your release. He has a very extensive case file which makes some compelling arguments for an early release, and it looks like the US Navy is going to oblige his request.”

“My…” Guano could scarcely get the words out. “What? Release, Ma’am?”

Spears tittered down the line. “Technically, it’s a bail application pending the reexamination of your charges in the light of new evidence. Somewhat unusual, I know, but these are unusual times. And it was a *highly* unusual set of circumstances that lead to your… ahem. Alleged crime in the first place.”

Guano struggled to process what Spears was telling her. “I’m… getting out?”

“Correct.” Spears sounded like she was reading from some kind of document. “According to Mister Turvey, you will be released on your own recognizance without having to attend a bail hearing. Given the unusual nature of this arrangement, you will likely be required to sign a statement affirming that you will show up for all of your required court hearings, and that I, Captain Spears, will be *personally* responsible for making sure you attend them. If you fail to do so, a warrant will be issued for your arrest. Which means you’ll be coming with me on my ship.”

Incredible. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure that happens. I’ve had my fill of violating the Uniform Code of Military Justice.”

“Mmm. Mister Turvey is of the opinion that you have yet to do such a thing.”

Guano sighed. “I understand, Captain. It’s just…”

“It’s just guilt,” said Spears.

It was true, as much as she didn’t want to admit it. “Yes, Ma’am.”

“Well, as a Brit, let me tell you something: we live and breath guilt. But it’s a useless emotion. You cannot change the past, Lieutenant Corrick. You can only take charge of your future. And I need you.”

That twigged something in her. “You… need *me*, Ma’am?”

“Yes. Lieutenant, there are two factors at work here. One, we need your help tracking down some ne’er-do-wells, and if I’m going to do this, I’m going to need as many people on my side as I can get. Secondly, it doesn’t take much creative energy to realize that what happened to you could happen to *any* of us. And the only way we can find out what happened and, more importantly, prevent it from happening in the future is if we have… ahem. A live specimen. So we’re going to take a look at those nanobots in your brain. Safely, on my ship, where I can guarantee your security personally.”

Guano lidded her eyes. “You want me to be part hunting dog, part lab rat?”

“Would you prefer to remain in Miramar?” asked Spears, as polite as ever.

“Not if there is any alternative.”

“Very well,” said Spears. “Then I look forward to speaking to you and your minder in person very soon.”

Minder? Guano almost hung up, but that was too weird, even for her. “What do you mean… minder?”

“I need someone to keep an eye on you,” said Spears. “As I am operating a Royal warship, I cannot devote the attention required to guarantee that I uphold my end of the bargain. So I have someone else in mind.”

“Okay,” said Guano, cautiously. “Who were you thinking?”

“I have someone in mind,” said Spears. “An old friend. He should just be getting out of interrogation now…”

She had no idea what that meant. “Okay, so I have a babysitter. So what? How can I *possibly* help you, even if I get out of here?”

“You have something I need,” said Spears.

“What’s that, Captain?”

“My trust. Something I give very rarely, Lieutenant. Commander Lynch is unavailable, as is Commander Modi, so I’m turning to you.”

Now she was *sure* she was asleep. “Why would you ever trust me?” Guano gave a loud, halting laugh. “You *know* what I’m in prison for. You haven’t forgotten?”

“No, but I trust Captain Mattis with my life. And he trusted you. Accordingly, I firmly believe you to be innocent. And I believe the answers to what happened to you—what has happened to others all around the galaxy—are locked up in your head. All I need now is your presence, and the presence of the Reardon brothers.”

“Okay, okay, so you’re going to cut my head open. Fine. Whatever. What do you need these *Reardons* for, whoever the hell they are?”

“That’s not a conversation for an unsecured communications line,” said Spears, quickly. “All will be revealed in time, I promise you. But for now, all I can tell you is that they too have something I need, and if we don’t get it, everything will go pear-shaped.”

“Um,” she said. “Right.”

“So the choice is yours. Stay in your cell, or save the galaxy.”

That really wasn’t much of a choice, was it? “Okay,” she said. “I’m in. What do you need me to do?”

Chapter Seven

Interrogation Room
San Diego Police Department
California
Earth

"Okay," said Mattis, rubbing his wrists ruefully. Damn cuffs had been tight. "You wanna hear why I was meeting with President Schuyler?"

"That's right," said Blair, settling back into her chair.

Acutely aware that interrogation rooms were always closely monitored, Mattis took a moment to get his thoughts in order. It didn't help that he hadn't slept properly, or showered properly, or eaten properly…

Focus.

"Okay." Mattis folded his hands. "So, after the… loss of the USS *Stennis*, I was reassigned to Earth. To administer Goalkeeper."

"That included a demotion, did it not? And a court-martial?"

The words stung as they came out. "Yes, it did. For reasons that were only tangentially related to the loss of that ship." He sighed tiredly. "It's a long and complicated story, Special Agent. Admiral Fischer lost half a damn fleet, but she got herself burned up, so they needed someone to blame."

"Seems unfair," said Blair. "You weren't in charge, so why did you take the fall?"

"Life isn't fair." After Chuck, Mattis was so numb to it all that he didn't really care. "Suffice it to say, getting posted to Goalkeeper was a pretty nice outcome. But they made it pretty clear that if I make one more mistake, I'll be riding a desk so fast my dick will fall off."

"Fair enough," said Blair. "But you haven't taken your post aboard Goalkeeper yet, have you?"

"No. Not yet. I had a *lot* of leave saved up over the years. Long service leave, too. Still have… oh, a few months left to go, I think. Maybe more."

“That’s fine, I suppose. So what does all of this have to do with the President?”

Mattis blew out a long, low sigh. “Well, the thing is… we had a serious incident on our last engagement. For reasons that remain unknown to us, one of our pilots—Lieutenant Corrick—found herself under the control of a man named Spectre. The exact mechanism of how he accomplished this is currently under investigation.” She had taken his grandson straight to Spectre…leading to the death of his son, trying to save him. As much as he *wanted* to not be angry at her, grief made it simply impossible.

Even when all the evidence suggested it wasn’t really her in control. There was no room for logic in his mind on this matter.

“Mind control?” Blair frowned skeptically. “I really, really hope that you’re not going to suggest to me that could be at play here.”

Mattis tried very hard not to frown in return. “I can’t say it’s impossible, but without any evidence to suggest that it might be, I can’t say it’s not. But Edita—sorry, I mean, President Schuyler—was obviously quite concerned about this, as anyone in her position might be. What if the same technology could be used to affect nuclear warheads? Or power plants? Or, more importantly, weapons systems like Goalkeeper?”

Blair nodded in agreement, visibly putting the pieces together in her head. “She wanted to know if you could investigate whether Goalkeeper was compromised and wanted to set that up *before* your leave was up. She didn’t trust that you wouldn’t be compromised before you arrived.”

Compromised *or worse*. They hadn’t really gone into the details of their meeting—that was, after all, what the meeting was *for*—but he knew it was important. “That’s right. We were going to have a chat about the best way to secure Goalkeeper and ensure that Earth’s premier defense system—apart from the Earth Defense Fleet of course—is safe. It’s a lot easier to do that if you’re working directly for the President of the United States. She…she didn’t trust the EDF.”

“The Earth Defense Fleet.” Blair rolled her eyes. “Jesus Christ. Even I know that decades of budget cuts have seriously undermined it. Ever since the end of the Sino-American war, there’s been no need for massive fleets of ships.”

It was hard to disagree. “Everyone says they want security, but are unwilling to pay for it when the time comes. It’s like they say: bullshit talks, money walks.”

“I like that,” said Blair, the corners of her mouth turning up with a smile. “I’m stealing it and pretending I came up with it.”

Mattis smiled. “Sure. Go for it.”

The moment of levity hung in the air before slowly vanishing.

“Anyway,” said Blair, resuming her formal posture. “So.”

“So,” said Mattis. “I’m guessing by now your guys have checked the logs in the car, showing conclusively that Elroy and I were nowhere near where President Schuyler was shot. I’ve shown I’m willing to cooperate. How about letting us go, hm?”

Blair checked her device for some time. Mattis waited patiently as she read.

Then, finally, with palpable hesitance, she gestured to his wrists. “Looks like the ballistics lab were unable to match the pistol in your car to the one that killed the President, and the autopilot in your car broke because the radio went out… it only turned back on when we pulled you in, because the emergency system has a backup only law enforcement can access. Further, satellite imagery shows you weren’t near the President when she was shot, so I suppose you’re free to go.” She locked eyes with him. “Is that what you want?”

Mattis stared her down, then slowly shook his head. “Not yet. I want to work with you and find who killed the President.”

“Very well,” said Blair, pushing back her chair and standing. She stuck her hand out. “Let’s get started.”

Mattis took her hand in his, shaking it firmly. “Right. Where to from here?”

Blair let her hand fall by her side and, with a low sigh, shook her head. “No idea. I’m not the only agent working on this case, but I was assigned to interview you on the off chance you had something to give us. Now that we’re done I’m free to go looking, I guess, along with every other agent who isn’t actively assigned to some other case. We already have the spaceports on Earth on lockdown, just in case, and we’re monitoring international flights. Logging everything. Facial recognition is hard at work trying to catch a glimpse of the shooter, but we’re having a lot of trouble identifying them.”

Identifying them… Mattis tilted his head. “Wait, you have a picture of the shooter?”

“Yeah.”

He scowled. “Then why the hell were you detaining Elroy and me?”

“He’s still being interviewed. We figured you might have been working with someone—either a co-conspirator or a hitman. A hired gun. We wanted to pressure you into confessing to that… figured we’d start with you, see what Elroy knows, tell him *you* confessed and see what he said. Honestly, we were spitballing, but you were *far* from our only persons of interest so far. Basically anyone who had contact with President Schuyler in the last month is getting grilled today, just like you.”

Wow. Great. Mattis bit back his retort. “Thank you for your honesty,” he said, sarcastically. “I guess it’s good to be wanted.”

Blair smiled slightly. “We’re on the same page now, Mattis. Thought you should know.”

“Okay,” said Mattis, forcing down his annoyance. “I’d… probably do the same.”

“Good.”

He stuck out his hand. “So let’s see this picture,” he said. “I can go over it with a fine-toothed comb, see if I can spot something your guys missed.”

“My guys are highly trained forensics agents,” cautioned Blair. “I doubt there’s much there that you can find that they aren’t already spinning through the facial recognition engine. It just takes a long time to go through, you know, a *planet* worth of people—let alone all the settled colonies out there.” Still, she seemed to relent, reaching into her pocket. “Based on their dress and style of clothes, we suspect they’re from an off-world colony, so we started with that.” She pulled out a tablet, turned it on and handed it to him. “Here.”

That was smart, Mattis had to concede. He squinted at the image. A grainy still of a man standing in the crowd, wearing a thin jacket despite the sweltering California sun. He wore a low hoodie and a bandanna pulled around his face, masking his features almost completely. Poor bastard must have been sweating like a pig… why had the Secret Service let him through? The guy looked suspicious as hell. Maybe the Secret Service were in on it. *Paranoid, paranoid…*

Realization and recognition came to him in a sudden flash. The eyes… Mattis knew those eyes.

“Oh shit,” he said.

Chapter Eight

Interrogation Room
San Diego Police Department
California
Earth

Mattis stared in bewilderment at the picture of Admiral Yim. Judging by the shape of the bandanna, he had grown a beard since Mattis had last seen him. His hair further obscured his true features—a fairly modest effort, black hair speckled with grey. He seemed grim. Nervous. Mattis flicked through the various still images. There he was, holding a pistol at his waist. Pulling the pistol up. Emptying three quick shots into President Schuyler, then disappearing into the crowd, pulling a hoodie up over his head to hide his face. Then he was gone.

Holy shit. It barely seemed possible, like he was a ghost drifting out of Mattis's past. For a moment, he couldn't process it. It seemed staged or forged or fabricated in some way. But the more Mattis took in his face, the more he had to concede that it was Yim.

"I know this man," said Mattis, unable to shake the eerie feeling in his gut, almost as though he were looking at someone else entirely.

"You do?" Blair leaned over the table. "What do you mean?"

Mattis turned the tablet around, showing her. "This is Admiral Yim of the People's Republic of China Army Navy. And before you ask, yes, that's just how they write it."

"No way. You *personally* know the shooter?" Blair frowned slightly, and he could tell—could just tell—that she doubted this was a coincidence. Was probably regretting letting him out of those cuffs.

"He killed my brother," said Mattis, bitterness creeping into his voice. Something he hadn't been able to get over, even though it felt like a lifetime ago. "During the Sino-American war. I've since come to know him. And even call him a friend." He stared down at the picture of Yim, pistol in

hand, a lick of flame dancing from the tip as it shot the President of the United States. “At least, I thought so.”

“That must be difficult for you,” said Blair, sincerely.

He managed a little smile. “Sorry I beat your computers.”

“Eh. Honestly, facial recognition software sucks with partially obscured images. Humans are much better.” Again, Blair’s professionalism slipped, but returned almost instantly. “But I have to ask: what do you know? How can we find him?”

Mattis shrugged helplessly. “I haven’t seen him in a long time,” he said, truthfully. “Last time I heard from him was after the destruction of the *Midway* at the battle of Chrysalis, and before that the only other contact I had with him was…” His voice trailed away.

Was when he had given the schematic for the Chinese-made gravity-wave engine to Chuck.

Chuck.

Damn. Why had he gotten himself messed up in this? Why had Chuck dragged himself into his father’s messes? Mattis was a career Navy man and a veteran—he had long ago accepted that he might well fall in the line of duty. That was one thing.

But to see his son dragged into his business, and then killed, had been something that he could not tolerate. He’d been putting it out of his mind, trying to get past it, and yet—

“Captain?” Blair waved her hand in front of his face. “Captain Mattis?”

“Sorry,” said Mattis, yanked out of his thoughts. “I… I was just thinking about my son.”

“You have kids?” Blair chuckled. “Yeah, me too. Two and four. Damn little bastards, you know? Always getting into things. Breaking stuff. At least they’re in school now… well, the oldest, anyway. Youngest is still with the sitter. Either way, such a relief to be able to actually come into work and not have to worry about ‘em so much, you know?”

He wasn’t sure if she was trying to bond with him or if it was a genuine moment, but Mattis couldn’t tolerate it anymore. “My son’s dead,” he said, simply. “He died a few… oh shit, nearly three months ago now.”

Blair said nothing, but the slowly growing concern on her face told him more than words could.

“Feels like yesterday,” muttered Mattis, trying to refocus. Trying to get his mind into the game, on Yim, and on the President. Thinking about

Chuck wouldn't bring him back. Thinking about anyone else wouldn't help. He just had to… had to keep focused.

"Sorry," said Blair. "That… must be very difficult for you, again."

"Yeah. Lots of things have been difficult. But you get past it."

Blair nodded quietly. "Right. Well…" she obviously wanted to say something else, but her watch flashed and a message appeared on it. "Hey," she said, eyes widening. "Do you, uhh… know someone called Captain Pippa Spears?"

The Royal Navy's finest CO? The most quintessentially British naval captain he'd ever known? "I do."

"Well," said Blair, curiously scrolling through the message. "Apparently she's arranged for the release of one Lieutenant Corrick, who will be joining us soon, and she sends instruction to put on a fresh kettle." Blair blinked. "Well, all the station has is instant."

"Offering an Englishwoman coffee?" Mattis snorted wryly. "Might as well be offering her cyanide. Tell me you have tea *somewhere* in this building."

"I'll see what I can do," said Blair, smiling a little. "Guess you'll be leaving with her, huh."

"Right. If Spears is coming here, then I'm going with her."

"And don't worry. I'll be coming too. Agent Dowling is going to steal everything related to this case that's not nailed down, and you're the only lead I have, so… I'd like to come with you and Captain Spears. As a consultant if nothing else." Frustration crept into her voice. "There really won't be anything for me to do down here, and if I stay on Earth doing paperwork for the rest of my life… well, let's just say I'd rather take the chance that there's *something* out there. Some lead I can use to… bust this case wide open."

Now it was Mattis's turn to pause and consider. He didn't know Blair, and not so long ago she'd had him in handcuffs. But he sensed that she genuinely wanted to help, and was obviously desperate to solve this case, even if it was only for career reasons. "It's up to Captain Spears," he said, finally. "But if it's okay with her, it's okay with me."

"Great!" Blair, with obvious awkwardness, took on a faux-English accent. "You and Spears and me better believe we got a lot o' jolly good work to do, eh wot?

It was a fairly decent impersonation, but this was the second time she had tried to make a joke. Was it her way of making up for detaining him? Mattis suppressed a smile. “She’s British, yes. But she is also very much a woman who doesn’t take kindly to mockery.” He took in a breath. “I’ll make sure she knows you’re coming.”

Blair snorted. “If she really sounds like that, I’ll eat my hat,” she promised, folding her arms. “Nobody does.”

The door to the interrogation room opened. Elroy’s head poked through the crack. “Looks like they’re turning me loose,” he said, seeming none the worse for wear. “Did you want me to wait around for you?”

Mattis smiled tiredly. “No. Look, I got a lot of work to do still here, and… yeah. You’ve done your part, son. Take the car back to Baltimore, then take Jack and get off-world the moment you can. I think things are going to heat up around here, and I want the two of you safe. Tiberius is nice this time of year. Take a vacation.”

“We’re too broke for that,” said Elroy.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll pull some money from somewhere.” Mattis made a *shooing* motion. “Go.”

The notion of a free vacation with his kid obviously appealed, and Elroy’s head quickly disappeared.

“That was nice,” said Blair.

Mattis’s smile faded. “I wasn’t kidding,” he said. “I have a feeling that a presidential assassination is just the beginning of something much, much larger.”

Chapter Nine

Armored Transport
Naval Consolidated Brig, Miramar
San Diego
California
Earth

Guano was a free woman for the first time in half a year.

The days had passed slower than she had possibly imagined; the routine of military prison had been uncompromising, designed to punish rather than rehabilitate, but she'd been a model prisoner. Followed every rule. She felt old. And drained.

But at least now she was getting out of here.

"Riding in style, I see?" said Guano, eyeing off the armor-plated vehicle with a skeptical eye. It was a giant hulking beast—a metal box with treads—the kind typically reserved for ferrying troops into heavy combat zones.

"Gotta be safe," said the guard, extending his hand to help her into the rear. She was a *fighter pilot*, dammit. Strong and fit. She was used to hoisting herself into heavy machinery. But as she leveraged the guard's support to clamber up the ramp, she could feel the slight atrophy in her shaky muscles.

Wallowing in prison will do that to you, I guess. Was cyborg-head Hulk girl gone, then? Her memory was foggy, but she did recall the frenzied thrill of inhuman strength pulsing through her veins on the *Stennis*. She shuddered.

"Why's that?" Guano plopped heavily into her seat with a sigh. "Think someone's going to shoot me?"

"If it can happen to President Schuyler," said the guard, as the steel door rose and sealed her off, "it can happen to anyone."

The president was dead. The thought consumed her as the armored vehicle trundled out of Miramar, toward destinations unknown. *Well, at*

least they know I didn't do that.

The vehicle turned, turned, and then came to a halt. Guano frowned. Had they just driven around the block? Had the military pulled out an APC to transport her for all of five minutes?

With a hiss, the rear hatch dropped open and she disembarked, squinting in the unforgiving California sun. She was outside a police station. They had blocked off the road, clearing a space big enough to land a shuttle on.

Standing just in front of her were Admiral—no, *Captain* Mattis now—and a tall blonde woman with an air of determined self-importance, but no cop uniform. White button-up, expensive watch; definitely FBI.

"Hey," said Guano, attempting a smile for Mattis. "The band's getting back together."

He didn't smile back. "Yeah."

Well, this was awkward. She tried again: "Heard the President is—"

"Dead?" said Mattis, nodding. "Yeah. That's what you're here for."

Guano stared at him. "To… kill the President?"

"No. We're going to find out who did it." Mattis's bearing was characteristically strong and direct, but he didn't look at her once. He *did* blame her, then. Guano's stomach plummeted, but she willed herself to answer in kind.

"How is that our job? Doesn't the FBI investigate when the president gets shot?"

The federal agent spoke up. "Yes, this whole investigation is under the jurisdiction of the FBI. But they're absolutely swamped with tips and leads and with departments volunteering their help… apparently their answer to all of this is to deputize as many volunteers as possible and see what they can turn up. Unfortunately, the Bureau is convinced the shooter hasn't gotten off-world yet, so that's their priority. That gives me an opportunity to spread my wings, so to speak. Tag along with you all. See what I can turn up."

Guano nodded firmly. "Right, well, Captain, you got me out of Miramar, so I guess I'm at your disposal."

"Technically," said Mattis, as a faint hum began to fill the air. He raised his finger skyward. "You're at *her* disposal."

Guano's eyes followed his upward to see a descending shuttle, the underside still glowing hot from the speed of reentry, as it dropped down

toward them, retrothrusters firing to break its fall. The thrust kicked up a wave of dust and debris, making Guano shield her face with her arm.

When the noise of reentry died down, a woman stepped briskly out of the shuttle. Her captain's uniform was inhumanly tidy despite the dusty, sweltering air swirling around it, her hair was pulled into a severe bun, and her blinking left wrist belied a portable computer. "Good morning," she chirped. Even before hearing the voice, Guano knew it could only be Captain Spears.

A flashy, urgent entrance for a nominally stoic, reserved Brit. What the hell was going on?

"Good morning," Mattis returned, stepping forward and offering his hand. "Great to see you, Captain."

"And you as well," Spears said, accepting the handshake with notable warmth. Then she turned to Guano. "Lieutenant Corrick."

"Captain Spears." She wasn't exactly sure what to say. She managed a halting, "It's good to be here."

Spears smiled. "Well, with all the pleasantries out of the way, let's get going. You better believe we have a jolly great lot of work to do, eh Mattis?"

Guano saw Mattis very subtly wink at the federal investigator, then turn back to Spears. "Of course. Oh, before I forget…" Mattis reached into his pocket, withdrawing a small thermos. "It's an herbal tea, but I think you'll like it."

"Bully for you," said Spears, and then beckoned all of them aboard.

Guano had to pinch herself. How had she gone from her cell to an APC to liberty to orbit in just a few minutes? But she determined to put it all out of her mind. She followed Mattis aboard the ship, taking a seat opposite the the blonde fed. Guano stuck out her hand. "And you?"

"Special Agent Denelle Blair." She took the offered hand gingerly, looking distinctly uneasy, glancing up at the roof as though expecting it to fall in.

"Never been off-world before?" asked Guano.

"Nope. Never. This is my first time. I, uh, actually applied for a transfer to the intergalactic branch, but…" The shuttle rumbled as it took off, lifting them into the sky. Blair gripped her restraints tightly, about to throw up. "Maybe this was a bad idea."

"Motion sickness bags should be below your seat," said Guano.

The shuttle vibrated as it climbed, passing through the upper atmosphere. Guano had flown enough exoatmospheric missions to almost sense, in a way, where the ship was relative to Earth. Her pilot's instinct informing her more than any sensors or gauges.

Damn she missed flying.

She tried to catch Mattis's eye, but he seemed focused on Spears, his voice raised to shout over the rumble of the shuttle. "Surprised you could get flight clearance with the Goalkeeper lockdown. And in the middle of all this, no less."

"Blackwood arranged it," Spears shouted back. "That woman is magic."

Guano had seen not Blackwood in action, but could hardly doubt that claim. She tried again to catch Mattis's eyes, but nothing came of her efforts, so she gave up.

"Okay," said Spears, leaning forward in her seat, testing the limits of her restraints. As if she had willed it so, the pressure and rumble of takeoff suddenly evened out into the silent weightlessness of space, and she was able to return to her characteristic calm efficiency without missing a beat. "With introductions out of the way, I'm glad you could all make it. We have a very important job to do, and we're going to need everyone in this ship in order to accomplish that. Thank you for coming."

Guano smiled wryly. "I didn't exactly have much choice, Captain."

"True." Spears's face was a grim mask. "But I thank you all the same. I need your help to find the Aerostar." She looked to Mattis. "And yours as well."

"What's an Aerostar?" asked Guano.

"It's a ship," said Spears, patiently. "Which we're tracking down."

Oh. Right. The hunting dog part. "Yeah. Okay. The Aerostar. Got it."

A moment of silence. Nobody asked the obvious question, so Guano went for it: "Why?"

Spears pursed her lips. "Because," she said, "when we analyzed the wreckage of the USS *Stennis*, there was something missing. A piece of it had been taken. A review of the flight recorders of nearby strike craft and an analysis of radar logs showed that the Aerostar had performed some rudimentary salvage in the wake of that battle. That piece is something I believe to be *extremely* important for securing ourselves against further attacks—whether from without, or within."

Guano narrowed her eyes. “A piece of wreckage from the *Stennis*? How is that important?”

“That,” said Spears, “will depend on what the piece contains. I strongly suspect it’s the *Stennis*’s main backup computer.”

“And how does that help us?”

“I don’t know yet,” said Spears, with a sigh. “All I know is that it was enough to have the Reardons execute a Z-space translation away about two hours after they picked it up—when we passed over their ship with a routine radar scan and it activated. That would have been just long enough to recover the computer, examine it, and see what was inside—then panic when we accidentally scanned it. And if they want what’s on the computer that desperately, then I want it too.”

“Okay,” said Mattis. “Well, the *Aerostar* is the property of Sammy and Harry Reardon. They’re resourceful, and they have more first-hand experience with the Avenir than anyone else in the galaxy. If we want to understand the Avenir—and, especially, Spectre—we need them first.”

Guano nodded. “Right.” She hesitated, but steeled herself to continue. It was important. “And… also you need to understand what happened to me, right, Captain Spears?”

“That’s right,” said Spears, obviously aware Mattis was sitting right there.

“And how do you intend to do that?” It sounded much bolder than Guano felt. *Fake it till you make it.*

“Well,” said Spears, thoughtfully, “first, we’re going to examine your brain.”

“Wait, you mean, like, surgically?”

Spears considered. “If necessary. For now, we’ll hold off on that. But I’m warning you, it may be in the cards.”

“Sounds great,” said Guano, grimacing.

Spears stared her down. “If you want me to return the shuttle to Miramar, I can arrange that.”

Guano threw up her hands. “Nah, it’s fine. I’m good. Really.”

“Good,” said Spears, settling back into her seat. “Because I haven’t even given you the bad news yet.”

Guano was about to ask what that was, exactly, but Blair suddenly reached under her chair, scrambling awkwardly, before withdrawing a red

paper bag, opening it, and barfing up what Guano presumed was her breakfast.

"Oh, that's just great," Guano, settling back into her chair. "Is it worse than the knowledge that we have about three quarters of a shuttle ride left with a space-sick person?" *Again with the bravado.* But she wasn't embarrassed… Maybe she was nearly herself again?

"Believe me," said Spears, casually reaching over and patting Blair on the back. "If this is the worst thing that happens to you today, you'll be thankful."

Lovely.

Chapter Ten

Shuttle
Hangar Bay
HMS Caernarvon
Low Earth Orbit

Mattis felt vaguely sympathetic for Blair as she hacked up her guts for the rest of the trip, the airsickness bag practically attached to her green face. His own space sickness had been well and truly trained out of him by the academy, but the notion that someone might not have had the benefits of that experience hadn't even occurred to him.

"You okay there, Agent Blair?"

Blair kept her head high, valiantly trying to mask her discomfort. "I'm fine," she said, her voice muffled by the bag. "I think I'm out of stuff to throw up. So I'm fine. Everything… is… fine."

"Very well. Just so you know, if you do, the bags are—"

"Yup. I know."

The shuttle vibrated slightly and Mattis kept an eye on Blair as a fresh wave hit her. He turned slightly back to Spears. "Kids."

"Let's just focus on getting to the *Caernarvon*, shall we?" Spears responded, smiling kindly toward the space sick youngster. "Do try to keep calm and carry on, my dear. We're used to it, but this mustn't be easy for a civilian."

"I'm not a civilian," managed Blair, her voice thin and raspy, muffled by the bag. "I'm a federal agent."

"That's a civilian in the eyes of the military," Mattis chuckled. "Sorry."

Blair glared at him. "We prefer the term *sworn* vs *non-sworn*," she said, but didn't look up to pushing the point.

"Fair enough," Mattis said. No need to kick her while she was down.

"Here," said Guano. "Old pilot's trick. Clench your toes inside your shoes. It'll help distract you."

The rest of the journey was filled with the spectacle of Blair, alternating between vomiting, insisting she was fine, then vomiting again whenever the shuttle changed course, accelerated, decelerated, or otherwise moved in any way. For Mattis, it was in some ways satisfying to see her—the woman who had interrogated him and implied he'd shot the President—with her face ashen, slave to a paper bag. But, after all, she was just a kid. And they were on the same side now.

Eventually, to the relief of all, the shuttle docked at the HMS *Caernarvon*, and a clipped British voice announced their arrival. The shuttle doors opened and the lingering, bitter smell of sick began to dissipate.

"Permission to come aboard, Captain?" asked Mattis, formally.

"Granted. To all of you." Spears gave Blair another motherly pat on the back. "Go see the ship's doctor for some cortrazoamine stabilizer," she said. "It'll make you feel tired as the dickens, but it does wonders for the inner ear."

"Sure," said Blair, attempting to stand, but abruptly halted by Spears's hand on her shoulder.

"One thing, Special Agent Blair," Spears said, her gentle sick-room voice instantly hardening with authority. "This is the HMS *Caernarvon*. A Royal Navy vessel. More critically, this is *my* ship. And aboard *my* ship, I am to be addressed always as Captain Spears, Captain, or Ma'am. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Captain," said Blair, obviously ashen, her eyes closed.

Spears smiled curtly. "Very well. Off you go, then. Infirmary. Cortrazoamine stabilizer. Double time."

Mattis had to hand it to Blair that she *did* attempt to hold her head high with her last shred of dignity as she hobbled off, bent double, in double time. He shook his head knowingly at Spears. "Landlubbers, what can I say?"

"Oh, acutely," said Spears, unclipping herself and standing briskly. "Although—back in the submarine service—we used to call them *boat people*. Or, less flatteringly, *targets*."

For just a moment, they indulged in the shared nostalgia. Those first days of recruitment for the space-fleet—a breathless time; a wild journey into the unknown. With no precedent to follow, the American Navy had filled their ranks with the surface fleet, and the Royal Navy had drawn from

their submarine service. Standing casually on the landing bay of the *Caernarvon* now, it seemed like another life.

"Right," Mattis said. "We should get to work, Captain."

Spears nodded agreeably. "This way, then."

Lieutenant Corrick stood as well, uncharacteristically silent. The three of them exited the shuttle together. A pair of Marines stood at attention on the base of the ramp.

"HMS *Caernarvon*, arriving."

Spears gave them all a crisp salute. "So," she said, as she led the way up the ramp. "Lieutenant Corrick. You've been quiet since we broke atmosphere."

Corrick seemed uncomfortable. Mattis knew he must be part of the cause, but he just didn't know how to interact with the girl. Her very presence was a constant reminder of Chuck. Of the absence of Chuck. "Yes, Captain," she began hesitantly. "I just… well. To be honest, I didn't think I'd ever be back onboard a navy ship. Not even this morning when I got up. Things are happening so quickly."

Mattis regarded her cautiously. "And how do you feel?" he asked. "No more… urges?"

Corrick shook her head firmly. "No. Whatever it was, it's gone."

Mattis took a deep breath and looked her straight in the eyes. "You realize that my grandson Jack was—" he cleared his throat. "Your actions put civilian lives—" his voice faltered again. He shook his head. No, this wasn't the time. "We'll talk about this," he said simply.

A tense silence hung in the air. Spears watched Mattis closely, her lips pursed. Corrick looked determinedly at the floor. Mattis let out a heavy sigh. "I'm sorry. I—I think I know that they weren't *your* actions."

"You *think*?" asked Spears, cautiously. "Jack, I told you…"

He was letting his anger—his damned emotions—get the better of him. He nodded curtly. "I know it."

Satisfied, Spears snapped back into military mode and nodded to Corrick. "Dismissed, Lieutenant. Report to sickbay and chase up our civilian—" she managed a slight smile. "Sworn or unsworn. And make sure they're all right. Sharpish, if you please."

"Aye, Ma'am." Corrick saluted, then turned and rushed through the bay doors.

Spears signaled for the two of her Marines to follow her. The way they moved suggested that Spears had arranged it in advance.

"Only two for an escort?" asked Mattis. "You know what she's capable of."

Spears shrugged faintly. "I'm of two minds about it, honestly. One part of me says *either we trust her or we don't.* Another part of me—the smarter, older, wiser part of me—says *trust, but verify*. Ultimately, the guards are there for her peace of mind as well as mine. Believe me, Jack. Regardless of if its her fault or not, ultimately the fact remains: if our pilot friend gives me even the slightest sign that she is being… *affected*… I will have her arrested and tossed into a dark hole from which she will not emerge." She pointedly rested her hand on her sidearm. "Failing that, I'll give her two in the chest and one in the head."

Mattis had absolutely no doubt she would. "Okay." He paused. "And why's the FBI agent here? Not just to puke her guts out, I hope?"

"Oh, no," said Spears. "I reviewed her file. Recently declined for a promotion. Probably wants to prove herself." She smiled softly. "A young up-and-comer, with a chip on her shoulder and willing to jump head first into something she doesn't understand… reminds me of myself, in a way, I suppose." Spears clicked her tongue. "Point is, she wanted to come, so I figured that with where we were going and what we were doing, we could use a bit of legal muscle. Lawyers are too slow; sometimes you just need a civilian on hand, yes?"

Mattis narrowed his eyes. "You sound like you're going to somewhere like Chrysalis," he said. Then the realization hit him. "Oh God. You *are* going to Chrysalis."

"I didn't say that," said Spears innocently. "However, the truth is there are indeed a few contacts on Chrysalis I might potentially want to leverage. Plus, it's a known place of business for the Reardons, and they trust you, so…" she tapped her nose. "But again, *I* didn't say anything."

"You didn't need to." Mattis grunted and ran his hand over his head. "I can never seem to escape that place…"

Spears smiled. "Well, bully for familiar stomping grounds, eh?"

He opened his mouth to say something sarcastic and biting, but before he could, the General Quarters alarm sounded throughout the ship.

Mattis and Spears exchanged a wide-eyed look, then both hurried to the core of the ship, feet pounding on the metal deck as the alarm wailed all

around them.

“Talk to me, Blackwood,” said Spears, touching her wrist computer. “What’s happening?”

“It’s Goalkeeper,” said Blackwood, her normally unflappably calm voice strained. “Earth’s planetary defense grid. It has identified us as a threat and is locking us up.”

“Prep the ship for Z-space translation,” Spears commanded, picking up the pace. “I’m on my way.”

Mattis could not believe for one second that Goalkeeper, his new command, had targeted them by accident.

“What does it mean?” he asked.

Spears opened her mouth to reply, but no answer came. Instead, she broke into a run, Mattis hot on her heels.

Chapter Eleven

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
Low Earth Orbit

Mattis sprinted after Spears as she made her way into the bridge—a place so much like his old commands, and yet so different. The same monitors and screens arranged in different positions. Disorienting. He wheezed, coming to a stop to the left of the Captain's chair.

"Captain on the bridge!" said one of the junior officers. He had to remind himself that the guy wasn't talking about *him*.

"Okay," said Spears, settling into her command chair. She barely seemed out of breath. "Tell me what we have."

Blackwood pointed to one of the monitors. "Goalkeeper's powering up, but they're painting us with their targeting radars. They haven't begun to shoot yet because their weapons are still on lockdown, but this isn't good."

"Patch me through to the CO of Goalkeeper," said Spears. "I want to speak to Admiral Chang."

"We already tried," said Blackwood, frowning darkly as she typed on her console, "there's a lot of interference. Jamming. Radar, EM, radio… everything. Our ECCM systems are algorithmically bypassing it; we *should* be opening a channel any second now. Standby—"

Spears twisted in her chair to look at Mattis. "What's your take on this?"

He blinked. "Goalkeeper is a multinational effort," he managed, fighting to get his breath back, "under Admiral Chang. There's no way he would fire on a British warship. Especially without talking to us first. There must be something else going on."

Spears nodded firmly. "Anything *specific* you can offer?"

Mattis hesitated, then shook his head. I know what you know."

If Spears was disappointed, she didn't show it. "Blackwood?"

“The algorithm’s found a pinhole. It’s weak, but it’s there. Patching you through now, Ma’am.”

A loud, crackling squeal cut through the bridge, loud enough to hurt, and over the top of the static came an angry voice. “This is Admiral Chang. Report!” Static washed out his other words. “—the hell’s going on?”

Mattis glanced worriedly at Spears, but said nothing.

“This is *Caernarvon* actual,” the captain said. “Our radar warning sensors show you’re giving us the stink eye, Admiral. Mind explaining why you’re locking us up like you’re about to give us a very bad day indeed?”

The interference increased. “—ay again,” said Chang. “We c—you.”

“Trying to compensate further,” said Blackwood. “Dammit. This is some high-energy jamming. Sophisticated stuff.”

Mattis scowled. “The source must be close,” he said. “And powerful. If it’s emitting that much energy, it should be easy to trace.”

“Right you are,” said Spears. “Blackwood, locate the source of the jamming.”

“Aye aye, Ma’am,” Blackwood said. “Calculating the signal’s origin and calculating a firing solution. Loading ‘party mix’; 30% AP, 70% HE.”

Was Spears onboard with this? Mattis looked from her to Blackwood. “You’re going to shoot the jammer?”

“Better have it and not need it than need it and not have it.” It was hard to argue with that logic.

“That’s right,” said Spears, vaguely unconvinced. “Blackwood, hold fire until we have confirmation, especially if it’s any part of Goalkeeper. We are *not* going to fire on an international station unless they fire first.”

“Signal origin located,” said Blackwood resolutely. She checked her instruments, and straightened her back. “The jamming is coming from the CIC of Goalkeeper’s primary satellite.”

“Weapons safe,” Spears said immediately. “Return guns to bearing zero, elevation zero, and disengage targeting systems. The *last* thing they want to see is our turrets turning.”

“Aye aye,” said Blackwood, notably frustrated. “Standing down.”

Mattis played it through his head. Goalkeeper was a massive network, expressly spread out so that damage to any single part could be compensated for by moving other satellites into place, or by changing the orbits of existing systems. The massive jammer on the command center was… not in keeping with its design philosophy.

“They’re baiting us,” he realized out loud.

“Pardon?” asked Spears.

“It’s bait,” Mattis said, convincing himself as he spoke. “Goalkeeper… I don’t think they’re actually painting us with their radars at all. Or, if they are, it’s only in response to some other threat. That’s why the jamming is coming from the command center—whoever’s doing this, they *want* us to fire at the command center because that is *casus belli* for them engaging us; we would have fired first. Right after you took me, Lieutenant Corrick, and a civilian on board, too. The optics would be terrible.”

A slow smile of comprehension spread across Spears’s face. “My God, you’re right. What should we do?”

“Run,” said Mattis, firmly. “Keep our guns powered down. Turn the ship away from Goalkeeper’s command center, power up the Z-space drive, and jump away. We can sort everything out later—by sending messengers in shuttles if we need to. But there’s a *reason* they’re jamming us, and it’s to keep us from communicating and realizing what’s really going on.”

“Alternatively,” piped up Blackwood, “they’re about to fire on us and we need to take action. Now. Goalkeeper’s weapons are powerful, but right now, we have a perfect shot straight into their CIC. We can cripple them before they have a chance to even let off a shot. And with this jamming, they won’t have a prayer of knowing what we’ve done before they’re hit. We should act first, Ma’am.”

“The prisoner’s dilemma,” Spears mused. “If we fire and they don’t, they lose. But if we don’t fire and they do, we lose. They’ll be thinking the same thing.”

“That’s why we should jump away,” said Mattis. “Let cooler heads prevail.”

“That’s why we should shoot first,” said Blackwood.

There was no time for debate, and Spears knew it well. She leaned forward. “Prep the ship for jump,” she said. “Power down all weapons. Hell, turn off the navigation lights too. Everything. Make the ship as non-threatening as possible. Then jump.”

“Aye, Ma’am,” said Blackwood, without missing a beat. “Working.”

Precious seconds ticked away, nothing but the squealing radio systems and the radar lock warning alarms reverberating around the bridge.

Then the *Caernarvon* jumped away, and the view of the bridge outside was replaced by rainbow hues and dancing lights, and everything was quiet.

“Well,” said Blackwood, her tone chipper. “That was exciting.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Mattis said, frowning. “What the hell is going on?”

Chapter Twelve

Infirmary
HMS Caernarvon
Low Earth Orbit

Guano stomped toward the infirmary, power walking through the warship's long corridors, fighting the eternal battle between speed and professionalism. She *had* to show Mattis and Spears that she was ready—that what had happened to her was not her fault, and that she was actively working to make things right.

She tried to pay no attention to the Marines behind her. One looked like a Ken doll—blonde, tan, all chiseled jaw and blank expression. The other seemed smarter, and watched her constantly with keen, dark eyes. In fact, he actually reminded her a bit of Roadie, which was probably why she couldn't bring herself to turn around and give the two of them some of her infamous trash talk. That, and they were obviously ready to shoot her in the back as soon as she acted out in any way.

She had killed Roadie and Flatline. Nothing could make that right. But maybe, just maybe this could be a new start. To contribute *something.* Somehow.

Deep in her thoughts, it took Guano a moment to register the General Quarters alarm sounding throughout the ship.

"Aww, shit! What now?" she growled angrily and broke into a run, following the signs that pointed the way to the infirmary. The ship's lighting switched to an ominous red glow. That was new… did all British ships do that?

She rounded the corner, nearly barreling over a nervous looking Ensign, then dashed into the infirmary. The whole place was on an active footing, with doctors and nurses standing by, ready to receive patients. It wasn't too crowded—the medical team were just at their posts—but she couldn't see her charges.

“Hey!” she shouted. “Agent!” Guano searched her mind for the name of the policewoman. Investigator. Whatever. “Puking FBI lady!”

“Here,” came a shout from somewhere in the crowd.

Guano stepped forward, but a nurse aggressively blocked her path.

“Sorry,” he said. “We can’t let you past there.”

“I’m with Captain Jack Mattis.” Guano folded her arms. “And… whats-her-face. That special agent lady. The ship’s on General Quarters, so this is no time for crap!”

The nurse sighed, his eyes flicking to the Marines—Ken and Not-Roadie—behind her, then stepped aside.

Agent-lady was sitting on an examination bench, spent foil wrappers nearby. Some color had returned to her face, but she still looked like a fish out of the water for too long; withered and unhealthy.

“You look like shit,” Guano shouted over the sound of the wailing General Quarters alarm.

“Thanks,” said the woman, though the smile on her face seemed good-natured. “You look like shit too.” What was her name? Brendan? No, Blair. That was it. Blair.

Guano grabbed a surgical mirror from nearby and checked herself out. Blair was right—her hair was a nightmare, her skin dry and flaky, and her dandruff had returned with a vengeance. The stress of prison—and murdering her two closest friends—had obviously not been kind to her complexion.

It was an inconvenient time to think about Roadie and Flatline, but Guano tried her best to act nonchalant. “Guess we could both use a makeover,” she said, putting the mirror down, forcing a smile. It wouldn’t be good to have a breakdown right now. She had to hold it together.

Fortunately, Blair laughed. “Right,” she said, obviously still suffering, but at least able to manage a crooked smile, her fingers in her ears. “How long is that alarm going to go on? What the hell does it mean?”

“A while,” said Guano. “Until, you know, the situation is dealt with. Or until we’re all dead.”

Blair didn’t laugh that time. Maybe that kind of humor didn’t work well with civilians.

“Sorry. It’ll be a while. It’s the call to action stations.”

“That explains,” said Blair, gesturing through the door, “why all the doctors jumped up in such a hurry.”

Of course the civilians didn't know anything. Guano sighed, reaching up and pinching the bridge of her nose. "Anyway, yeah. It should go away soon." She tried to change the subject. "So, how about them local sports team, huh?"

Blair snorted. "Don't really much follow sports, sorry." She grimaced as though she might throw up again. "How did you get roped into this anyway, Lieutenant?"

She understood Blair was trying to make conversation, trying to get her talking so they didn't think of the alarm blaring around them, but it didn't do anything for her. All of her instincts screamed to jump into action. To be where the fight was. "Yeah. Well..." No sense trying to drag it out. "I was in prison for murder. Spears got me out."

Blair's whole body tensed up. "Murder? What—"

"I didn't do it," Guano snapped. "It was… complicated, but I didn't do it. Not really."

Blair just looked at her. Didn't back her up. But then again, how could Guano expect her to?

"I really didn't do it," she said. "I know everyone says that, but I *didn't*."

"They *do* all say that," Blair said stonily.

"And prison sucked. By the way. Just so you know."

The subject—the murders—was obviously something Blair didn't want to discuss, but at the same time, she *was* clearly looking for a distraction from puking. "Yeah, well… thanks for that clarification. *How was prison? What did you do to get in there?* Seemed a little trite to just… *ask*, you know? I deal with the other side of things. Putting people in there."

"Yeah. It's okay. I get it." Guano gritted her teeth, forcing herself to be sociable. "Spent most of it in solitary to be honest. Didn't make any friends, didn't make any enemies. Didn't get to join any gangs—didn't get a chance. Almost all of the people in there were just stupid kids, really. That was my impression, at least. No hardened criminals. Just… idiots who did stupid things like pull a gun on their CO, or get busted for a DUI, or drugs. They didn't want a crazy pilot—" she caught the word on her tongue. "*Former* pilot in their business, I guess."

That, and most people seemed actually genuinely happy to see her, like she was some kind of hero or something. Nobody had messed with her. Had they known what she'd done?

“Great,” said Blair, unsmiling. “I’m glad to see our nation’s penal system is effective.”

Right as Guano formulated a biting comeback, the General Quarters alarm went silent. “Guess we live to get arrested another day.”

Blair shook her head. “I don’t get arrested. I *do* the arresting.”

Guano almost said “Well, the day’s still young!” but she squashed the thought down. No need to push it too far. “Okay,” she said instead, hands on her hips. “Now you’re looking a bit better, let’s get us some quarters and get settled in, shall we?”

“Right,” said Blair, pushing herself up to a sitting position. “Then we can get to work trying to find out who killed the President.”

“Yeah,” said Guano, casting a worried look to the ceiling. “I think that might have to get put on hold for a while. We might have bigger fish to fry…”

“Nothing us *civilians* can do about that,” said Blair, truthfully. Damn. She was right.

Her own words rattled in her head. *Former pilot*…

It was true. She was finished.

“Anyway,” Guano said, forcing herself to remain calm, keep her tone neutral, steady. “While I’m here, I guess I better check in with the medical techs. Since I’m the freak with robots in her brain, after all.”

Blair’s blank expression reinforced the sneaking suspicion that she didn’t quite appreciate Guano’s humor, so Guano gave up and whipped around to grab the next passing nurse. It happened to be the same one who had stopped her on her way in. “Hey, my name is Lieutenant Corrick. I’m the one with the nanobots.”

Her name seemed to spark recognition in the guy. “Holy shit,” he said, eyes widening. “Patricia Corrick? You are *really* not supposed to be back here.”

“But Spears said—”

The nurse snapped his fingers and, almost immediately, the two Marines were clamping her shoulders with their heavy hands.

“Okay, okay, I’m going,” she huffed to Ken—she still couldn’t quite look at Not-Roadie. “No worries.” And they immediately frog-marched her straight to the exit.

“Guess I won’t be on the flight roster anytime soon, huh?” she asked them.

“Correct,” said Ken said robotically, with that inhumanly handsome face of his. Don’t enter the infirmary or anywhere else unless ordered to by Captain Spears,”

“But she *did*—” Guano began. Two beefy hands clamped even harder; it was useless. “Forget it.”

Former pilot. The words rattled around her head. Was this to be her last flight? And not as a pilot—or even as a passenger—but as a *prisoner*?

Chapter Thirteen

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
Z-space

Mattis had to admit that he'd missed this. He'd missed being on the bridge, in the center of the action, surrounded by the crew typing away at consoles, fingers flying with precision. He'd missed the huge monitors displaying a multitude of sensor information, data uplinks, and images of the strange, multi-hued unreality of Z-space.

The awesome sight was almost enough to put out of his mind the disturbing implications of what had just transpired. Almost.

And the niggling knowledge at the back of his mind that he was forbidden from ever commanding a ship again.

"So," Spears said, steepling her fingers. "Seems that we're out of the woods, for now."

"For now," echoed Mattis, considering. "Damn. And here I thought we could actually complete a simple mission with no complications."

"Doesn't sound like us," said Spears, whimsically. "Speaking historically, at least."

True enough. Things never seemed to go smoothly. The best-laid plans never survived contact with the enemy, after all.

Blackwood spoke up. "We're a substantial distance away from the station now. We should drop out of Z-space and recover."

Spears considered, then nodded firmly. "A solid plan, number one. Do it."

The ship slipped out of Z-space into an empty, desolate void—the vast, almost infinite emptiness between solar systems.

"We've translated out of Z-space," said Blackwood, straightening her back. "All systems are green across the board, Captain."

“Very good.” Spears sighed, leaning forward and adjusting her already perfectly neat hair. “Where’s my bloody tea?”

“I’ll hustle some up for you,” said Mattis.

She waved her hand dismissively. “I’m not having you fetch tea on my ship. I didn’t run all the way back to Earth to recruit a chai wallah, Admiral.”

Mattis attempted to smile through the grimace that swept, unbidden, over him. “I’m sorry, but it’s not *Admiral* anymore. I was demoted to captain after the events of… late.”

“Strange,” Spears said, a sly smile creeping over her face. “I think I might have misplaced that memo. It’s my ship, and if I want my crew to call you *Susan,* I think they will.”

Well. He wasn’t about to contest that, nor undermine the chain of command on her ship. “Very well,” he said, grinning a little. “It *is* your ship.”

A light blinked on Blackwood’s wrist computer. She inspected it, then looked to Spears. “Captain, we’re receiving a long-range communication from Admiral Chang on Goalkeeper.”

“Oh,” said Spears. “*Now* they want to talk.” She clicked her fingers. “Put them through.”

The speakers crackled--a man’s voice. “Goalkeeper Station One, *Caernarvon*. This is Goalkeeper actual. Priority alert.”

Yeah. Priority. Mattis recognized Admiral Chang’s voice. The man had left him a voicemail, first welcoming him to Goalkeeper. All the associated guilt came back in a flash. Mattis shouldn’t have taken so much leave; he should have just reported for duty right away. But then, if he had… he wouldn’t be here now. And who knew what he would be involved in instead?

Spears straightened up in her seat. “This is *Caernarvon* actual. Glad to hear that our comms have cleared up somewhat.”

“Copy that,” said Chang. “Apologies for the unpleasantness before.”

“Unpleasantness is an understatement,” said Spears, a coy smile coming over her. “But I can officially tell you: it’s quite all right. No harm done.”

“No harm done,” Chang agreed.

Spears considered. “But that, of course, does raise the interesting question of *what* actually happened, and *why*. The first interaction we had with you was your targeting radars locking us up.”

“First we had with *you* was your range-finder lasers establishing distance.”

Spears blinked. “The *Caernarvon* is not equipped with range-finding lasers,” she said, matter-of-fact. “We use a passive, differential coincidence rangefinder that relies on secondary data from radars. Unless the radars are turned on—which they weren’t—it’s a passive system. And we were *definitely* not locking you up with it. Either way, no lasers.”

“Interesting,” said Chang. The confusion in his voice seemed genuine. “I’m just double-checking the logs now. Standby.” A brief pause. “We just checked. Definitely laser rangefinders.”

“Well,” said Spears, “*we* certainly didn’t shoot them at you.”

“Okay,” said Chang, “so where did they come from?”

Chapter Fourteen

Aft Airlock
HMS Caernarvon
Deep Space

Lieutenant Pierce Daylin-Rutland adjusted the collar of his space suit, taking in a deep breath of recycled air. He stepped out of the airlock and onto the outer hull, his magnetic boots sticking to the thick metal. A squad of Royal Marines stepped out behind him.

"Exiting," Daylin-Rutland said. "Radio check."

"Check," Spears returned. It was comforting to hear her voice on the other end of the line. "Proceed, Lieutenant. You and your team are cleared to go."

Daylin-Rutland wasn't sure *exactly* what he was looking for—none of them were—but Spears had ordered a full sweep of the outer hull. They needed to find the laser emitter. It might be big, might be small; might possess its own power system or be tied into the ship's systems… a simple targeting laser was small enough to have its own battery.

"Confirmed, Captain," said Daylin-Rutland. "Never fear, we'll find that bastard."

"Roger. Report to me when you've found it. Spears out."

Daylin-Rutland closed the connection, then switched frequencies so he could address his team. "Team Alpha, head to the superstructure. Bravo, take the underside of the hull. Charlie and Delta, port and starboard respectively. Sweep the ship from aft to stern, and sweep the EM detectors over anything that protrudes, beeps, blinks, or buzzes."

"But sir," protested Lipham. "We won't be able to hear any buzzing in our suits."

Staff Sergeant Whitcomb Lipham. The ship's resident blooming moron.

"That is correct, Staff Sergeant," said Daylin-Rutland, putting one foot in front of the other on the *Caernarvon*'s hull. He turned his head from left

to right, patiently scanning the bare hull. Nothing. Just armored plates. “We won’t be able to hear anything because the vacuum of space prevents the transmission of sound.”

“Okay,”Lipham said. “So why did you say that?”

Daylin-Rutland stepped carefully over a sensor array, grunting slightly as his magnetic shoes got drawn in; he fought the invisible pull. “Because it’s a metaphor, Lipham. Our goal is to find the laser system that’s been installed on the *Caernarvon* and, if possible, see if we can find some clue as to who installed it.” He passed his EM scanner over the sensor. Nothing.

“Okay,” said Lipham. There was a moment—a brief, blessed moment of quiet—and then Lipham’s voice came back over the line. “Hey, is this it?”

Daylin-Rutland switched his helmet’s view to Lipham’s helmet camera. The idiot was peering at a sensor module, identical to the one that he had just stepped over. “No, Staff Sergeant. That’s a sensor module and its whitelisted.”

“How do I know if it’s whitelisted?”

“Use your sensor,” Daylin-Rutland said, patiently. God, that man…

“Oh.” Lipham waved the device over the module. It lit up green.

Someone snickered over the line. “God, Lipham. Stop being such a wanker.”

“Easy now,” said Daylin-Rutland. “Let’s stay focused. See if we can find this blasted laser.” He waved his EM sensor back and forth in front of him, searching for strange signals. They had shut down *everything* they could think of to try and eliminate background noise, but they hadn’t had any luck. He made it nearly a third of the way down the ship before the silence broke.

“Lieutenant?” *Lipham again*. “I think I got turned around. I don’t think I’m where I’m supposed to be.”

Daylin-Rutland really wanted to slap himself in the face, but the thick visor prevented it. He stopped walking. “How can you get lost *walking in a straight line*, Lipham?”

“I don’t know,” said the guy. “But I’m back at the stern.”

“Okay,” said Daylin-Rutland, straightening his back. If Lipham was lost, then the sweep was compromised. “All units, halt. We have a man out of position.”

The entire team groaned into his ears.

“Sorry,” muttered Lipham. “I’m coming back.”

“Okay,” Daylin-Rutland said, with a touch of real sympathy. It was actually pretty easy to get turned around on a starship hull; there was no true horizon, only the metal below and the stars above, so it was definitely something even a *non*-moron could do. “Just turn toward the bow and move forward. Try to catch up with where you were.”

“Roger,” Lipham sounded back.

More moments ticked away with absolutely nothing to do but stand stand still and watch the distant, untwinkling stars above. They were so beautiful this far out of the solar system…

Spears finally cut in. “Lieutenant? What the devil’s going on out there?”

Biting his lip, Daylin-Rutland opened the channel. “Just some minor delays, Captain. One of our men found himself out of position, so we’re just getting him right.”

“Very well,” said Spears, the slightest edge of sarcasm creeping into her voice. “Take your time, no need to rush.”

Biting wit aside, that *was* his plan. “Right.”

“Lieutenant Daylin-Rutland?” *Lipham*. “Uhh, I was going back to where I think I got separated, and… well, I tripped.” He huffed and puffed, attempting to catch his breath. “I went to look at what it was, and… I do think I found something this time. It’s me.”

Daylin-Rutland sighed and sucked in another breath of recycled air. Stars above. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” said Lipham, “that I’m seeing an image of me on the hull. Like, it’s been super polished or something.”

A reflection? A dark sense of foreboding came through him. “Is the object on the white list?”

“I don’t… *think* so,” said Lipham, with his signature confusion. “The sensor doesn’t recognize it.”

“Is there an EM signal from… whatever you’re looking at?”

“No,” said Lipham. “Nothing. But sir… maybe you should take a look at this.”

Daylin-Rutland lowered his EM sensor, running a gloved hand over the thick perspex of his visor. Maybe it was nothing… “If this is another sensor module,” he said, trying with some difficulty to keep his voice even. “I swear to God, Lipham, I will lose it.”

“It’s not, but it’s… super weird,” Lipham whispered. Magic words for piquing interest. Daylin-Rutland tapped his wrist, adjusting his view to

match Lipham’s.

He saw it instantly. A square, reflective surface attached to the hull with a simple spring-loaded clamp. No EM signature at all. Of course there wouldn’t be, it was just a mirror. It showed the stars and the black, a reflection of the endless void. It was nearly impossible to see anything against the dark hull plating.

“Is it whitelisted?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

Lipham waved his sensor over it. “No, sir. I wouldn’t have seen it if I hadn’t have tripped over it.”

“Bully for you, Lipham,” Daylin-Rutland whispered, eyes wide. “You’re a bloody genius. We need to show Commander Blackwood—*stay there*.”

Chapter Fifteen

Aft Airlock
HMS Caernarvon
Deep Space

Mattis stepped in beside Spears, cautiously folding his hands behind his back. “What do you think they found, Captain?” he asked, keeping his voice neutral. “Because I tell you what, the crew of the *Stennis* found a lot of stuff on their ship too…”

Spears didn’t answer immediately, though it was clear that her mind was going the same places his was. “Lieutenant Corrick couldn’t have put the laser on the ship,” she said, flatly. “She was either under lock and key, or being transported under armed guard, or literally sitting opposite me inside a locked metal box before and during the incident. She didn’t do this.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Mattis said. “But *someone* did.”

“That much is clear,” said Spears. “Someone put a foreign object on the hull of my ship and I’ll be damned if I don’t find out who did it.”

As Mattis watched, the airlock began to cycle, pumping air out and letting in a troupe of space-suited Royal Marines. They were transporting something large and flat, with a reflective side.

“Well,” said Blackwood, helping to gingerly lower it to the floor of the airlock, reflective side down, “search teams didn’t locate a laser. But we *did* find this.”

“What the devil is it?” demanded Spears. Then, with a soft *tut tut tut* noise, “That doesn’t look like any kind of Royal Navy equipment I’m familiar with.”

“Hmm. It looks like a mirror to me” Mattis considered, grinding his teeth. “Damn. Such a simple thing—no wonder our sensors didn’t pick it up. It was so simple our scanners didn’t notice it.”

Blackwood gave a little smile. “Maybe Spectre got so sick of losing that he just decided to plant mirrors on our ships so he could watch his own

stupid face when he lost next time."

Spears wasn't amused. "A winner is a loser whose tried one more time."

True enough. Mattis's chest started to hurt as he thought it over. Fighting with Spectre had caused him so much agony. So much loss. His fight had taken the *Midway*, had taken Chuck… and now Jack was with Elroy, off-world, having a well deserved vacation.

The airlock completed its cycle and Spears stepped forward, examining the thing with a skeptical eye. "What do you reckon it is, Admiral Mattis?"

"Well," he said, considering, "it's definitely not a laser. But a device could be concealed within it; we should have it X-rayed, and then disassembled. Or—" Suddenly he had an image of the one-way mirror in the interrogation office. The pieces came together in his head. "What if this really *is* just what it looks like? A simple reflective surface. But a tool, nonetheless."

Spears's look said she made the connection at the exact same time. "The *Caernarvon* was, itself, painted by the laser which had its origin in some other source?"

He nodded, eyes narrowed. "But such a feat would require them to be close," he said. "Very, very close. They would have to avoid hitting our passive sensors, avoid the laser dissipating… they would have to be in a precise spot, and they would have to have an excellent visual on us. They couldn't have been on Goalkeeper—they would have detected the emission—but… the source couldn't have just been exposed in open space. We would have seen them."

"Still," said Spears. "The panel was mounted flush to the hull, wasn't it?"

"Yes Ma'am," said Blackwood, unclipping her helmet, her hair spilling out down around her shoulders. There was a very brief moment, a strange moment, when Mattis thought she… was doing that *for him*. Flirting with him maybe. It was odd. Maybe he was imagining it. Maybe he was missing Ramirez more than he thought.

"Well," said Mattis, trying to move past those strange thoughts. "We know our orientation at the moment the target lock was established. And we know Goalkeeper's position. So we could extrapolate back… we can draw a line, bounce it, and see where it goes. They must have been along it."

Spears nodded firmly. "I'll have my boffins look into it," she said. "Should be some simple trig. But that doesn't explain *where* the laser came

from, and why it was hidden…”

Mattis squinted, trying to think. “Maybe they were always there.” The picture slowly formed. “It’s possible the laser was fired from a ship using stealth technology,” he said, an edge of caution in his voice, careful not to mislead her. “But no class of either human or Avenir ship that I know of uses that technology.”

“Who might have?” Spears asked impatiently. “Do you know anyone who could help us?”

Only two people leapt to mind. Mattis swore darkly.

“What?” asked Spears, turning back to him. “Admiral Mattis, I have a fresh bar of soap in my quarters if you need to clean out your mouth.”

He grimaced. “My apologies, Captain. It’s just… there are only two people I can think of who might know about stealth technology. Commander Lynch, who’s—” he hesitated, “still recovering from his wounds. And Admiral Yim of the People’s Republic of China Army Navy.”

“Well,” said Spears, nodding emphatically. “I suppose we better find Admiral Yim double-quick then, shouldn’t we? He seems like our best chance.”

Or…

Mattis smiled slightly. “Do you know what the best thing about being in space is?”

“Certainly not the food,” Blackwood interjected dryly.

“Guns,” Mattis said. “Without gravity, rounds travel in a straight line.”

Spears blinked. “Yes. So?”

“*So*,” Mattis said. “We know where they were. The biggest weakness of stealth technology is that *moving* risks exposing you—and if the source was so meticulous about establishing this precise point so close to Earth, they aren’t going to want to leave it.” He grinned. “We know where they are. Let’s go blow ‘em up.”

Chapter Sixteen

Guano's Quarters
HMS Caernarvon
Deep Space

With Not-Roadie and Ken in her quarters, Guano couldn't sleep. She tossed her sheets aside. Might as well accept it. With an annoyed grunt, she dragged herself up into a sitting position. "Okay, I'm going to get changed, so… out."

The Marines didn't move, but—to their credit—they did clear their throats and look away.

It would have to do. Guano pulled on some BDUs. She had hoped that the British quartermasters had American uniforms on hand, and given the two forces' pattern of cooperation, it wouldn't be unusual, but no such luck. She was dressed like a redcoat with American epaulets. Which wasn't a bad look, really, but for some reason, it made her cranky. She stormed out of her quarters, into the *Caernarvon*. Not-Roadie and Ken followed.

Their presence didn't annoy her as much as she had expected it to. She needed to talk to someone, to figure out what she was going to do and how she was going to help… so went to the quarters just beside hers, and—barely able to stifle a yawn—went over to the door to her right. She had no idea who was there, or if anyone was there at all, but… she just wanted to hear a comforting human voice. Anything to take her mind off Not-Roadie, even though he was right behind her. All she had to do was just ignore him. All she had to do was pretend he wasn't there…

A group of British sailors turned into the corridor from the junction farther down, laughing and chatting inanely. Her hand hovered over the metal of the total stranger's door, about to knock, but for some reason she couldn't. Annoyed, she waited for the sailors to move away.

For someone seeking out human company, you sure have a dogged determination to avoid it. She grunted softly, playing that thought in her

head. Maybe all those months in solitary were not good for her after all. Who could have known?

Suddenly, from behind the sailors, Guano's eye caught a fleeting glimpse of a face in profile, walking through the junction. Her stomach plummeted. *Doctor Brooks*.

She froze, rooted to the spot, memories of Brooks holding her prisoner on Chrysalis screaming back into her head.

He was here. He was here and he was Spectre and *he was aboard the ship*.

"Hey!" Guano roared, jabbing her finger toward Brooks. "Ken! Not-Roadie! Arrest that man!"

Understandably baffled, the Marines just looked at her. So Guano did the stupidest thing she could possibly imagine doing in her situation—she snatched Ken's pistol from its holster and pointed it down the corridor at the gaggle of British sailors. Damn it. They were in the way. "Stop that man!"

Ken gaped. But Not-Roadie recovered more quickly from the confusion and pulled his gun on her. "Drop the weapon!" he shouted. At the other end of her sight, the clump of sailors still obscured her shot.

"Out! Move! Make a hole!" Guano made a break for it, pistol in hand. "Get out of the way!" She shoved past the crowd of idiots, shouldering one of them roughly into the bulkhead.

"Oi!" He shouted.

The Marines yelled after her and gave chase, but she knew they wouldn't shoot in the crammed corridor. She sprinted to the junction. Goddammit, if Brooks was here she wouldn't worry about a trial, a jury, or due process; she would put a bullet in him right now and watch him die.

She'd already killed him once. Twice, actually. Maybe third time would be the charm?

"Out of the way!" she shouted, skidding around a corner, seeing the back of his head bobbing over another flock of British sailors. There he was, the son of a bitch. She drew her pistol, aiming carefully.

A head moved in front of her target. She swore and kept her aim steady. Then, a clear shot presented itself as Brooks stopped to ask someone a question. She heard laughter as her finger tightened over the trigger.

Then he turned to greet someone else, and suddenly it wasn't him at all.

Trembling, she eased her finger off the trigger. Someone else entirely… an innocent British sailor going about his duty. And she'd nearly shot him

in the head for it.

Holy shit.

Guano took a deep, long breath and holstered her pistol in her pants, just in time for Not-Roadie to break through the crowd behind her and crash-tackle her to the ground. He grabbed her arms, pinning them behind her back, and she felt heavy-duty cuffs slide around her wrists. The pistol was yanked away.

"Just what the *fuck* do you think you're doing?" he spat. Sailors were staring at her from every direction. She caught the surprised expression of the guy she'd nearly plugged.

Guano shrugged him off. "I thought I saw someone," she said.

He scowled at her, then, with a sigh, grabbed her and pulled her to her feet with one hand. "You're in some deep shit now," he said, muttering darkly as he dragged her back toward her quarters. "You know how much bloody bullshit trouble I'm going to get into because of this?"

She finally looked him in the eye. To her surprise, she thought she detected an infinitesimal hint of amusement there. Understanding? So she tried it: "Hey, if you won't tell anyone, I won't tell anyone." She could have *sworn* she'd seen Spectre-Brooks… sworn it on her life. "Deal?"

He didn't answer right away, and for a moment she thought he just might agree, but Ken finally caught up to them, a vein in his forehead bulging—livid with anger—in his abnormally tan face.

Not-Roadie turned to his partner and returned the stolen pistol. He gave Guano one more searching look. Then—"Nah. Sorry. I have to call this one in."

She sighed. Maybe she *was* losing it.

Or worse… maybe she *wasn't*.

Still, Not-Roadie hesitated before touching his radio. But Ken let out an exasperated puff and grabbed it. "Sergeant Whitacre to Commander Blackwood," he said. "There's been an incident with Lieutenant Corrick. Code green, no injuries."

That couldn't be good. "Blackwood here. Acknowledged."

"Should I drag her to the brig, Ma'am?"

Blackwood sighed down the line. "Check in with the infirmary, see if they're ready to examine her yet. If they aren't, do it."

Not-Roadie snatched his radio back and changed frequencies, glaring at Ken—Whitacre. "Sergeant Mayaan to the infirmary. Interrogative, how

goes Doctor Manda's surgical preparations?"

"We're almost ready," said the voice on the other end. "If she's being a bother, bring her down now if you want."

Anywhere was better than the brig. "Hey, uh, *Mayaan"*—So much better not to constantly think of Roadie—"Ask them about the thing with the nanobots. How are we doing on that?"

The voice on the radio answered her: "We're good to go, just undergoing final preparations now. We can move the schedule up."

Ken grabbed her arm and abruptly turned them back toward the infirmary. "We're on our way now," he barked into the radio.

"Works for me, " said Guano. Then paused. "Wait, surgery?"

"Yup," said Mayaan, as Ken half-carried her, half-dragged her, clearly still furious. "Just for that little stunt, you're getting your head cut open."

Chapter Seventeen

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
Z-Space, near Earth

Mattis moved to take his customary spot on Spears's left. Blackwood stood to the right beside her XO's console.

"We're coming out of Z-space," said Blackwood, tapping a few keys on her wrist-mounted computer. "We should be right where we left off—in a different rotation, of course. But the computer will correct that."

"Great," said Mattis. "Hopefully we can get to the bottom of this quickly."

The ship completed its translation, multicolored hues of Z-space fading away and replacing themselves with the black inky void of real space. The guns of Goalkeeper, along with its missile batteries, magnetic railguns, nuclear torpedoes… so much death encircling them, were ready to fire in a single moment.

"Well, said Blackwood, her voice pleasantly chirpy, "if they're going to shoot at us, now's their moment."

Spears smiled grimly. "As long as I get my bloody tea, and maybe a crumpet, I think I'll be fine."

Mattis wasn't sure if they were joking or not. Spears's dry humor was almost impossible to discern from sincerity. "At least it'll look cool," he said. "Plenty of witnesses. The pieces will probably drop down into Earth's atmosphere. Look really pretty."

"Very pretty," Blackwood agreed.

They waited. They waited for Goalkeeper to destroy them, to break *Caernarvon*'s hull plates and bulkheads. But nothing happened.

"Captain," said Spears. "Incoming transmission from Goalkeeper."

She signaled to put it through.

“Welcome to Earth, Captain Spears,” said Chang. “Don’t mind the hardware on display. Not that we don’t trust you, but…”

Mattis squinted at the screen, staring down the barrel of a massive cannon larger than any gun he had ever seen. Or even heard about. It must have been nearly 100 cm in diameter—twice as big as even the biggest World War II naval gun, and bigger than anything that saw service in the Sino-American war by a long way.

The mere thought of being struck by such a monstrous round… A single shot of that thing would end them.

“Trust has to be earned,” said Spears, evenly. “We know that just as well as you do. It’s not a concern, Admiral Chang, and to be honest, if our suspicions are confirmed, we just might appreciate those guns.”

“You like them, huh?” said Chang, with no small degree of pride. “All the recent upgrades have really raised the level of Goalkeeper’s capabilities, especially *Little Friend* right there.”

Cheeky. Mattis had noted how easily Goalkeeper had been overcome during The Battle of Earth, where it had contributed almost nothing. A skirmish wherein Jeremy Pitt had been killed in action. And then, just when they all thought Pitt was back, he had turned out to be… something else.

Still, regarding Goalkeeper, it was good to see its capabilities increased. This time it might actually do something. “Glad to have you on our side.”

“Very glad to be here. So. Run this plan of yours by me again?” asked Chang, cautiously. “Just so we’re all on the same page.”

That was actually a wise idea. It was probably good to have everyone clear on what was about to happen before they started firing off heavy ordnance into space, especially given what had happened before.

“So,” said Mattis, “the plan is for the *Caernarvon* to adopt the same orientation and position it was in when it was painted, and then fire in the direction of the laser. If there really is a cloaked ship, we’ll find it.”

“Copy that,” said Chang, and then he hesitated. “Wait, is that… Jack Mattis? I know your voice from the news.”

He chewed on his lower lip. “Y—yeah.”

“What the hell are you doing on board that ship?”

Spears cut in. “The good Jack Mattis is helping us on special request from the Royal Navy. He’s here as our guest. We just picked him up.”

“And don’t think that’s quite a coincidence?” asked Chang, suspicion creeping into his voice. “That this kind of incident happens the *moment* you

bring Admiral Jack Mattis aboard—”

“Actually,” said Mattis, formally. “It’s *Captain* Jack Mattis.”

Spears muted the call and turned to glare at him over her shoulder. “Not on my ship you aren’t,” she said, in a tone that brooked no argument.

It was genuinely nice of her to stand up for him like this, and a captain’s word was law in the Navy. “Aye, Ma’am. Just keeping up appearances.”

“Do so less convincingly.” Spears unmuted the call, and her voice instantly melted into a warm British cordiality. “In any event, Admiral Chang, if you be so kind as to put a pin in this discussion and table it for a later date, I’d be much obliged.”

“Very well,” grumbled Chang. “Mattis, when you finally report for duty, we are going to have a long, boring conversation about this. Bring scotch. Bring lots of scotch. For me. You get to watch me drink it and try to explain this mess away.”

Lots of scotch it was.

Spears tutted. “So we’re cleared weapons hot, then?”

Chang sighed. “There’s no observable traffic along the corridor you’re firing along, and whatever *is* eventually in the line of fire, well, they’re much too far away for us to care about.”

The idea that they would be lobbing high explosive shells into space for them to drift out of the solar system and onward forever was a sobering thought. *Eventually* they would have to stop, either by falling into a star or hitting something and exploding.

No time to think about that. “We’re ready,” said Mattis.

“Very good.” Spears adjusted her collar. “Blackwood?”

“Aye, Ma’am.”

“Fire down that corridor. And have the camera track the shots, I want to see what we hit.”

Blackwood typed on her console. “Six guns, HE-tracer, tight spread following prearranged vector. Firing.”

The ship shook quietly as the rounds leapt away from the *Caernarvon*’s guns, bright yellow streaks flying across space, the tracers leaving bright and highly visible lines. Blackwood’s camera followed them dutifully as they sailed away.

And they continued to sail, on and on. The rounds flew past the silhouette of the moon and onward, growing fainter and fainter as they moved farther away.

“Well,” said Mattis, dejected. “that isn’t good.”

Then the rounds disappeared.

He couldn’t believe it right away. Must have been his old-man eyes… but the more he stared, the clearer it became. The rounds had simply… vanished. The very moment they’d entered a spot approximately a hundred and seventy-thousand kilometers away.

A cloaking field.

“Repeat,” said Spears, her voice charged. “Hit them again!”

“Aye Ma’am, six guns, HE, tight spread following previous vector. Firing!”

Another set of six streaks went out. “Fire for effect,” said Spears, “all guns. Keep firing.”

The ship shook as it opened up, whining softly as all its weapons spoke. Waves of fire streaked toward the void, following the path of their previous shots, and just like those ones, they simply disappeared after crossing a strange, seemingly arbitrary threshold.

Then the cloaking field melted away to reveal a massive Avenir warship.

Chapter Eighteen

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
Space, near Earth

The Avenir ship's front was marred from weapon impacts, scars still glowing an angry yellow. The bridge of the *Caernarvon* instantly became a frenzy of motion, and the General Quarters alarm rang throughout the ship. Screens lit up, revealing a flurry of information that Mattis tried to digest.

Though he admittedly missed the action, in some ways it was interesting to *not* be the one in charge. Mattis could observe the minutiae of functions a combat warship completed in real time. Despite the inevitable rush of adrenaline, the instinct to command—it just wasn't his place to make the decisions now. So, instead, he watched the loading process for each individual gun proceed in the graphs, the torpedo guidance system calibrate for a launch, the counter-missile point defense systems spin up and begin searching for targets.

And, of course, he saw the hulking ship ahead floating angrily in space, red lines growing over it as it charged its weapons. Odd—they should be shooting by now, but the cloak must have drained their power. Despite its bulk, the ship was clearly smaller than the other Avenir he'd faced. And it probably had a commensurately smaller reactor core.

Soon, the frenzy calmed down as everyone settled in to wait and watch. Was it hostile? Was it one of the Avenir ships that was on the hunt for Spectre?

Or was it controlled by Spectre himself? Mattis shuddered as he remembered Spectre, Avenir-controlling device in hand, standing triumphantly on the bridge of an Avenue ship over Chrysalis, flanked by Avenir he'd essentially converted into his own drones.

And minutes later, his beloved *Midway* had paid the ultimate price.

“Detecting energy buildup in their forward weapons spires!” yelled an ensign at ops. “And they’re painting us with targeting lasers!” The bridge burst back into a flood of activity as the realization hit that this was indeed a battle and not a parlay.

“Designating hostile ship as Skunk Alpha,” said Blackwood. “Killing with guns. Prepared for torpedo launches on your command, Ma’am.”

“When you have a clear shot,” said Spears, sitting in her chair with her posture attentive, “not before. See if we can identify their point-defense and hit them with our guns. Soften them up a bit. Loosen their guard.”

“Very good, Ma’am.”

Spears snapped her fingers toward one of her junior enlisted personnel. “Irish breakfast,” she said. “Piping hot if you please.” Tea again. Always with the damned tea…

Mattis had fought the Avenir before. He knew what to expect. “If there are any serious buildups of energy within the ship,” he offered, “it could well be a mass-driver, but that’s unlikely with a smaller ship. They have other tricks—a gravity-bomb, or their portal-opening device…”

Spears considered, stroking her chin carefully with her hand. “Seems like every time we fight these buggers, they have something new up their sleeves.”

“Firing,” said Blackwood.

A barrage of gunfire splashed against the hostile ship. The vessel continued to power its weapons, obviously struggling to bring its strike capabilities up in the face of its sudden discovery.

“That does seem to be their thing.” Mattis scowled darkly, unwelcome thoughts intruding into his head. Thoughts of how his side always seemed to win, but that it was only ever due to chance or numbers. “And this does, of course, raise the question,” he said. “Where did *this* one come from?”

“It’s possible it came through with the ships involved in the Battle of Earth,” said Spears. “Assuming it could maintain its cloak through Z-space translation. Or it’s possible it came in later, through… whatever mechanism the original fleet used to get here.”

Either way it was an academic discussion best left for another time. The *Caernarvon* continued to pour fire into the hostile ship, scoring dozens of hits and solid weapons impacts, yet received no reply.

“Why aren’t they returning fire?” Mattis asked. “There’s no way we hit them *that* badly…”

“Unclear,” said Blackwood. “I can confirm we haven’t received a single hit yet. Damage control teams are standing by.”

That was a good place for them to be. Standing by. Mattis liked them there.

A voice cut in over the din of the bridge. “Captain Spears, incoming transmission from Goalkeeper. Text only.”

“Read it,” said Spears.

The officer turned back to their screen. “It reads as follows: Goalkeeper requests permission to engage.”

“Requests permission?” echoed Spears, eyes widening. “What do they want, a blasted handwritten invitation? Reply by the same channel: Weapons free, coordinate fire with our guns.”

The message was sent. Then, almost as though they were waiting for the cue, screens on the whole bridge lit up as Goalkeeper opened fire.

The last time Mattis had seen Goalkeeper in action it had been a fairly underwhelming event, where the turrets and weapons had been largely inaccurate, ineffective, and easily destroyed. Their guns were too small, missiles too small, everything too small…

Whatever the system had been then, it couldn’t hold a candle to what it was now. The whole section of visible space ahead turned white as a full barrage of the planet-wide defense network opened up, thousands of rounds leaping across the void to each blast a hole the size of a large car in the forward hull of the scout ship, as though its armor were paper.

Then *Little Friend*’s round—seeming more like a falling star than a cannon projectile—drove into the Avenir vessel, buckled its hull like a boxer’s fist slamming into drywall, broke through to its inner core, and blasted the thing into a white-hot ball of expanding gasses and debris.

Mattis genuinely had no idea what to say in the face of such an awesome and terrifyingly destructive display, so he just stood mutely watching the flaming wreckage of their enemy tumble through space.

“Uhh… Skunk Alpha is trashed,” muttered one of the bridge crew, sheepishly.

“Bloody Yanks,” muttered Spears, finally. “Always with the biggest guns.”

“I guess some of them are all right,” said Blackwood, smiling.

Mattis found the levity unsustainable. “That was just a scout. A smaller one. And it either didn’t seem to use its weapons properly, or… more

alarmingly, didn’t want to. Either way, I’m reluctant to pat ourselves on the back too much.”

“It remains to be seen.” Spears considered. “Commander Blackwood, please take charge of the salvage and investigation of this ship. Or whatever’s left of it.” She looked to Mattis. “And, Admiral, please do accompany her if you could. Your expertise and experience with these devils from the future will surely prove invaluable.”

Spears wanted salvage? From *that?* Mattis watched the spinning pieces of debris tumble toward the camera and shook his head. “I’ll do what I can,” he said.

“Make sure you do,” said Blackwood ominously, the words sounding almost like a challenge. “But be careful. We’re still reading power signatures from some of those larger pieces. Stay alert. I doubt the Avenir are out of tricks just yet.”

Chapter Nineteen

Surgical Ward 1
Infirmary
HMS Caernarvon
Low Earth Orbit

Guano pulled down her hospital gown, trying to not let her backside fall out. The hard, cold bed she was lying on was extremely uncomfortable, to say the least. The last time that she'd seen the inside of a surgical ward, it had been when Flatline was injured. And the more she thought about him, the less comfortable she felt.

And it didn't help that her wrists and ankles were restrained by leather straps.

"So," said the chirpy, far-too-British doctor who had prepared a large, ominous-looking machine ready to scan her. She was wearing one of those wrist computers that the Royal service people all wore. "First time seeing one of these?"

Guano eyed the machine suspiciously. It was like a box-shaped porcupine with every quill shaped like some kind of camera. "Considering I think this is a custom-built thing designed specifically to scan for nanobots in infected patients, of which I'm willing to bet there is only one—me, I don't exactly know how you're expecting me to answer that question."

The doctor sighed "True enough. But let me just put down on my notes that the patient was irritable and belligerent."

"If you don't," said Guano, "they'll probably think I was losing my mind again."

The doctor chuckled lightly and wrote something down, then put away her pen and paper. Strange that she was using such simple, primitive recording techniques. Must be like an MRI—can't have computers nearby. "Okay," said the doctor. "I think we're ready to begin."

Guano squirmed uncomfortably on the bed. "What's your name again?"

“Doctor Sunila Manda,” she answered patiently. “And don’t worry. I’ve been assured by the *absolute best* people that this device is perfectly safe.”

Perfectly safe, yet she had to be its very first victim. Had it even been tested? “Somehow, I don’t feel this thing is safe,” she said.

“Don’t be such a wet blanket, you’ll be fine,” Doctor Manda scolded lightly. “…*Probably*.” She smiled. “Now, just stay still…”

Easy to do when she was strapped down. Great… just great. Guano took in a sharp breath and held it.

“That’ll do,” said Doctor Manda, tapping her wrist computer.

The porcupine spines lit up, each of them glowing as they moved toward Guano, peering at her like the curious eyes of some kind of horrid beast. They hovered all around her head, inching closer until they were a hair’s breadth away from her skin.

Guano stifled a nervous laugh. “Always joked about how my military service would end with me getting my brain cut open and examined for observation and study in the name of science,” she said, trying not to blink or breathe or do anything that might cause a needle-camera to be driven into her skin. “Didn’t think it would actually happen, though. Nope.”

“That’s fine,” said Doctor Manda. “Just count backwards from ten.”

That she could do. “Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one.”

Doctor Manda smiled widely. “Wow, check out that brain. Great pre-frontal neural activity. The machine is waking them up… and a good thing, too! Those little bugs are really getting excited. Makes them a lot easier to see.”

“So hey, you’re in my brain right now.” She ground her teeth. “That’s… neat.”

“Mmm. Okay, we’re going to stimulate them in three, two, one… mark.”

Nothing. She didn’t feel any different at all. “Are you sure it’s working?” No answer.

“It’s hard for me to believe that this thing is waking up a bunch of tiny robots in my noggin when I can’t even seem to… to keep myself…” her voice trailed off. “Awake.”

Somehow she had been transported. She was no longer in the infirmary. She was no longer aboard the *Caernarvon*. She was surrounded by a green wall of liquid. Familiar liquid.

She was back in the vat on Chrysalis. Doctor Brooks was there, standing right there, his face leering at her through the glass.

“Hello, Lieutenant Corrick,” he said, his voice so clear, despite the tank. “I want you to listen to me very carefully…”

And then, with a start, she was back in the infirmary. More specifically, she was lying on the cold metal deck, face down, the broken remains of the leather straps wrapped around her arms and legs.

“Sorry about that,” said Doctor Manda. She was leaning against the far wall, her hair slightly tousled. “I cut the power. You okay?”

“I’m fine,” said Guano, taking a deep breath to steady herself. She pushed herself up onto her knees. “Damn. How did I get on the floor?”

Doctor Manda hesitated. “You… well, you stood up, broke your restraints, and tried to kill me.” She watched Guano warily. “Well, I guess we know that you *are* being affected, I suppose,” she offered.

Guano pushed herself up back onto the table, groaning softly. She must’ve nailed her elbow when she, apparently, facedived onto the deck. “Ow.”

“Maybe,” said Doctor Manda, “we should consider some stronger restraints while you’re under.”

“Are you hitting on me?” Guano with a lopsided smile.

Doctor Manda snorted a little, but still seemed somewhat frazzled by what had apparently just happened. “Let’s just get you some hardened steel restraints and see how that goes, shall we? And maybe get a couple of Marines in here, too…”

Guano lay herself back onto the hard bed as worry started to creep into her brain. “You sure that’s necessary?” she asked.

“That was two percent power—a test,” said Doctor Manda. “If we want to get those things out of you, we have to be able to identify them, and in order to be able to do that, we’re going to have to keep you engaged and lucid the whole time. Obviously it won’t be possible for you to—ahem. *Move around* like that during the surgery.”

“Damn,” said Guano, her chest sinking. “I’m even more messed up than I thought.”

“You’re going to be okay,” said Doctor Manda, smiling hesitantly. “You’re going to be just fine.”

That, Guano mused dejectedly, was *exactly* what people said when things were not going to be fine at all.

Chapter Twenty

Hangar Bay
HMS Caernarvon
Space, near Earth

With the *Caernarvon* matching velocity to the largest debris field, they were now ready to go. Mattis strapped himself into the Extra-Vehicular Activity suit, double and triple-checking everything. Then, when he was done, he checked Blackwood's suit and she checked his. Behind them, in the hangar bay, their team of Royal Marines likewise suited up; each one of them, in turn, checked the next.

He appreciated their comprehensiveness. It was highly unusual for senior staff to go out on a salvage mission like this, but given the sensitive nature of what they had found, Spears had specifically asked him and Blackwood to lead the operation. They were accompanied by a small company of trusted Marines who had been ordered to be extremely cautious. Nobody was taking any chances.

After what had happened to Chuck, that suited him just fine.

"I think we're good to go," said Blackwood, giving him a firm clap on the shoulder that he barely felt through the thick EVA suit. "Okay. The plan is pretty simple; everyone splits up into pairs, and sees what they can find. Guess you're with me, Admiral."

It still gave him slight pause each time Spears, Blackwood, or their crew addressed him by his previous rank, but he was long beyond caring about such things. "Very well," he said. "I'll try to keep up."

"That's the spirit." Blackwood turned toward the hangar bay doors and touched her wrist-mounted computer. Responding to her command, the doors silently swung open.

"Neat," said Mattis, pointing to her device. "I'm going to have to find myself one of those some day."

“Sooner rather than later, I hope.” Blackwood’s magnetic boots disengaged and she pushed off the deck, small puffs of gas propelling her toward the exit. “They are exceptionally useful.”

Mattis clicked his heels together, disengaging his own boots, and pushed off after her. The suit’s computers plotted out a course for him and steered him in behind her as they drifted out past the hangar bay doors and toward the nearest large piece of debris.

“Teams, split up,” ordered Blackwood. “You all know your assignments.”

“I don’t know our assignment,” said Mattis, feeling slightly foolish, bringing his mind to the moment. “Guessing it’s the big bit.”

“You *are* a clever biscuit,” said Blackwood, her tone disarmingly polite. Although it was sarcastic Mattis didn’t sense any genuine hostility there. “How’re you finding floating in space?”

Mattis had done enough EVAs to not worry too much. He turned his head, getting a lovely shot of Earth in the background; a perfect, blue-green marble floating in space. “I rarely get to see our homeworld so close,” he said. “It’s… it’s comforting, really.” It was also comforting because Elroy and Jack were not there. He hoped they were safe and having fun, wherever they were.

“I don’t find it comforting. Any number of mechanical failures at this second could, well, immediately end our little sightseeing tour.”

“Well, so it always is in space,” he said. “The void is a harsh mistress.”

“But sometimes kind.” Blackwood raised a gloved hand, pointing to something he couldn’t see. “There’s our first piece.”

They drifted closer. In a few moments, the debris was in full view; it was a hull fragment, brittle and torn at the edges. It was probably from deep inside of the ship judging by the lack of reinforcing. There was some kind of huge metal box attached to it.

“Okay,” said Blackwood, leveraging puffs of gas to slow herself down. “Let’s pull up alongside it. You grab the left side, I’ll grab the right.”

“Roger,” said Mattis, tilting his head. The suit’s guidance systems read the command and pushed him away from Blackwood toward the twisted hunk of metal. It slowly spun as he approached it, the edges still glowing an angry yellow. Heat from the explosion. “Careful, it’s hot.”

“Our gloves should be able to withstand it.” Blackwood floated in opposite him, grabbing hold of the metal, her suit’s jets fighting to steady

the giant thing. Thin wisps of smoke rose from her fingers. “Grab hold.”

He did so, taking the other side, his own EVA suit struggling to slow the heavy piece’s momentum. He could feel the heat from the metal, burning and melting his gloves, but Blackwood was right; they were tough.

Finally, between the two of them, they were able to stabilize it. Mattis got a good look at the debris.

The hunk of metal, nearly fifty meters across, seemed to be an internal bulkhead attached to a refrigeration locker, the frozen box sealed with a magnetic lock. “I think we saved their sandwiches.”

“Bully for us,” said Blackwood. “I’d love to taste food from the future.”

“Maybe that’s why they’re coming to our time,” said Mattis. “They’re here to steal our snacks.”

“You sound like Commander Lynch,” she said. Blackwood aligned her wrist to the magnetic lock, engaging her cutting laser. A bright shower of sparks leapt from the metal as a tiny sliver dissolved.

…Did he? Carefully, Mattis leaned over and pulled open the freezer, a shower of frozen ice and boiling gas spraying out. “Time for lunch,” he said, grinning to Blackwood.

“Oh, nothing wrong with an early lunch break,” said Blackwood, smiling widely through her spacesuit. “C’mon. What do we have?”

Inside were row after row of frozen bodies encased in ice. “Whoa,” said Mattis, staring. “Looks like we’ve got their morgue?”

Blackwood’s face fell. “Not so good for lunch, then,” she said.

Mattis chortled. “Oh, I dunno,” he said, reaching up and brushing away some of the ice. “They might be kinda tasty with the right…” his voice faded away as his hand revealed a line of faces.

The corpses were all President Schuyler.

Chapter Twenty-One

Space
120km from HMS Caernarvon
Near Earth

"…amount of hot sauce."

Mattis stared at the row of line of frozen President Schuylers stuffed into the freezer. There were a dozen of them, all lined up like sardines in a can. Frozen blocks of human. They were even dressed in identical suits.

"Well, ain't that dark as all bloody hell," said Blackwood, floating up beside him. "This isn't regular salvage; Spears will want to know. We should call it in."

"We definitely should." Mattis touched his radio. "Mattis to *Caernarvon*: we found a giant frozen box full of corpse-clones of the recently assassinated President of the United States."

There was a long, pronounced pause. "This is *Caernarvon* actual," said Spears measuredly. "I'm afraid I'm going to need you to say all again."

"The first piece of salvage we've recovered is a bunch of clones, frozen in some kind of cryo unit. Clones of the recently deceased President Schuyler."

"Other reports are coming in," said Spears. "They're finding bodies. Or body parts. I'm guessing they, too, might be your former President… but, of course, being Royal subjects, they wouldn't recognize her as well as you would."

That made sense.

"Oh," said Spears, almost as an offhand comment. "Be careful of the scavs. We're tracking a *bunch* of civilian traffic moving in from all directions, and I'm betting not all of it are curious travelers. We're warning them away, but you know what civilians are like. Most avoid military warships but some just can't help themselves. My motto is: they can look but they can't touch. Anyone who touches is a scav."

He turned to Blackwood. “Scavs?”

Blackwood coughed into the radio. “Scavvers are illegal salvage operators. Ever since the Battle of Earth, there’s been a bunch of low-life rats coming around to pick the bones from the various wrecks and debris fields that have sprung up in the system,” she fumed. “They’re rotten space pirate scum and they tend to shoot first and ask questions…well, only when they’re put on trial.”

Personal vendetta? He wanted to ask, curious about her intense reaction, but in light of their present mission, he thought better of descending into personal conversation. “Oh, great.” Mattis slowly shut the door of the ice box. “Well, hopefully we won’t run into anyone who’ll have anything worse to say to us than ‘good morning’.” He sighed. “We should get this morbid thing back to the ship, and join it with all the others, I suppose.”

“It is certainly morbid,” said Blackwood, staring intensely at the metal surface of the freezer box. She frowned, scrutinizing it closely.

“What?”

“It’s warm,” said Blackwood. “The debris was hot, almost too hot to touch, and it’s hot all the way through… but there’s ice on the inside.”

“It’s heavily insulated,” said Mattis. “I guess.”

“Is it?” Blackwood eased the door open again and stuck her fingers inside. “This material is less than a few millimeters thick. Even the best insulating material we have has an R-value of, oh, say fifteen over an inch. Even vacuum is only fifty per inch. For the metal to be yellow-hot and the inside to be ice… that’s some serious magic.”

A ship silently flew past them, snatching up pieces of debris. Some kind of civilian ship, painted bright pink, seemingly oblivious to the huge warship nearby.

Despite the presence of the other ship, Mattis didn’t like watching Blackwood feel around the door. A feeling in his gut didn’t like her curiosity. “We shouldn’t be fiddling with it. That’s something for the salvage engineers to pick apart later. Earth is *right there*; there’s no need for us to get handsy.”

“I know, but—”

Something made the hairs on the back of Mattis’s neck stand up; he wasn’t sure what it was, but just as he was about to act, a powerful rush of energy surged out of the device, a palpable wave of cold washing over him.

The temperature on the inside of his suit plunged, like a door was suddenly opened on a midwinter's night in Maine. His breath misted up his visor.

"Oh shit!" Mattis said, flailing around madly to break up the sudden ice formation on the inside of his suit. Burning pain danced all over his body. "Goddammit, that's cold!"

Instinctively, Mattis wiped at the outside of his visor, trying to clear it, but the fog was on the inside of his suit. He kicked and thrashed, blinded and freezing. Did his suit have a hole in it? Was this what dying in the vacuum of space was like?

It wasn't, but his panicked mind didn't know the difference. He grabbed his radio. "Blackwood! Spears! Mayday, mayday, mayday. We activated some kind of trap on our salvage item." He had no clear way to identify it. "It's a cold—it's a cold thing. My whole suit is freezing up."

His teeth chattered violently and his muscles ached as any remaining body heat was sapped away. Nobody answered. He couldn't see or hear Blackwood. His ears were full only of a faint creaking from the ice buildup, the puffing of his respirator, and the faint crackle of static over the line. His suit flashed warnings at him, ominous phrases like *signal lost* and *error* and *emergency beacon activated*.

"Blackwood! Blackwood, are you out there?"

Cold. So cold. So freezingly, bitterly cold. It must have been below zero Celsius… below ten even. And he was essentially naked inside his suit, with nothing but a thin cotton jumpsuit. His brain couldn't think anymore. "Blackwood! *Caernarvon*! Come in! *Anyone*?"

Then, ominously, the hissing sound of his respirator stopped.

Ice. His breath had frozen and iced over the ventilator. The tube was blocked.

Mattis frantically began hammering on the side of his helmet, trying to dislodge the blockage. The warning chimes and beeps were replaced by wailing klaxons. *Port ventilation blockage* one said. Helpful. *Maintenance/servicing required* said another. Very helpful.

All his scratching and beating on his suit hadn't accomplished anything. He felt himself spinning, tumbling through space as his own frantic movements threw him completely off course. All the air he had to breathe was what he had in his suit, and to maintain pressure, it was pretty tight fitting.

Minutes, maybe.

“Blackwood!” He realized shouting like a moron wouldn’t do anything either. Despite the sudden bitter cold, despite the threat of a lack of air and the instinctive panic it caused, he forced his breathing to be regular. Even. And then he thought through his problem logically.

How can I unblock a blocked plug on the inside of my suit without opening it?

Most suit systems had redundancies built in—ways to solve various problems that might arise. For example, he possessed two oxygen tanks in case one failed. But they both exited through the same outlet.

He couldn’t reach inside the suit, and he couldn’t remove his helmet. But he could possibly increase the oxygen pressure; that might blow out the blockage. Or it might only make it worse, because compressed air was cold. But the pressure…

No time to think. If he didn’t try something now he would die. Gritting his teeth against the unbearable chill, Mattis struggled blindly for the oxygen knob on the side of his suit, grasping it roughly and turning up the pressure on the left tank to maximum.

The pressure on the other side of the vent blockage built and built, and another wailing alarm joined the previous ones—a cacophonous racket that railed in his ears. The pipes cracked and leaked, but he kept the knob turned to the maximum. Shards of ice broke off, the pressure blasting them into his face, tiny little pieces of shrapnel cutting up his cheeks.

Freezing compressed air flooded his suit, the high oxygen content making him swoon.

And then the left tank spluttered and ran dry, and the vent slowly began to close again.

Damn. With only one tank left, even if he could clear it, then… then it would be pointless anyway.

His hand trembled as it sought out the other knob to emergency-blow his secondary tank. Maybe it would be enough. It was terrifying to be blind and mute, floating in an endlessly expanding debris field, and he wanted to be free of it.

But he felt so lightheaded. So dizzy. Too much oxygen? Or not enough? Or was it the cold—that biting, aching cold that stole the heat from his bones?

Lethargy took over, a wave of palpable emptiness that sapped his energy. He had just had a massive jolt of oxygen, so his suit would be over-

pressurized. He had plenty to breathe at the moment. Maybe he should wait to blow the second tank. Just wait.

How idiotic of him to die on a salvage mission. He just had to hold tight and wait for rescue. Not think about how freezing cold it was, or about how dizzy he was…

Just wait…

Wait…

A firm jolt startled him, but he was so far gone it barely registered.

Then he felt his helmet slipping off, but darkness claimed him before he could protest.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Surgical Ward 1
Infirmary
HMS Caernarvon
Low Earth Orbit

Guano raised her hands experimentally, testing the limits of her new restraints. They'd tied her hands and feet down with steel cables thick enough to hold down a Warbird on a ship experiencing emergency Z-space translation, and another extra-thick leather strap was clamped around her neck and another around her forehead to secure her head. The leather creaked ominously every time she moved.

"This is some kinky stuff right here," she said, in an attempt at levity. "Doctor fantasies, leather stuff, a hospital gown that shows my butt… lady, you are into some weird shit."

Doctor Manda chuckled. She was out of view but close to Guano, judging by the immediacy of her laughter. "Well, that's one way to look at it. They're just for my protection."

"I know."

"Honestly, if they're uncomfortable, we can have one of these fine Marines check them for you. Just say the word."

Guano glared at the backs of Ken and Mayaan's heads standing guard outside the small glass window of the infirmary door. She sighed. If she was going to spend the rest of her life as a prisoner, she could at least get these damn things out of her head.

"Honestly it's fine. But now I'm all BDSM'd up to the max, what's the next step?"

"Well," said Doctor Manda, matter-of-factly, "We need access to your prefrontal cortex and basal ganglia. The basal ganglia is a subcortical collection of neuron clusters, including the ventral tegmental area and substantia nigra—they produce the majority of the brain's dopamine—and

the striatum, an important site of action of dopamine. To do this we're going to make an incision in your scalp, creating a hole known as a bone flap. It's all done with high precision lasers of course, and you'll be well-sedated, so I doubt you'll feel much more than a pinch."

"Great. Scientific proof that I have a brain. The flight crew will be so proud." Of course, she had received enough injections to know that they were rarely just a pinch, but she would deal with that when it happened. "Why do I need to be conscious for this?"

"Because," said the Doctor, "we think that the nanobots do more than cause disordered thinking when they emit their chemicals in low doses. There might be side effects; things like psychosis from the excess release of the neurotransmitter dopamine into regions deep inside the brain." Manda paused, as though reading off something Guano couldn't see. "While this theory offers a compelling explanation for the co-occurrence of symptoms like hearing in schizophrenia, there have been only a small handful of studies that have directly supported this theory."

"Oh, great," said Guano, groaning out loud. "It's not just open brain surgery. It's *experimental* open brain surgery. Based on a *theory*."

"A theory well supported by strong observational evidence. But you should count yourself fortunate, Lieutenant Corrick; the source of your illness, the nanobots, are actually known. Compare and contrast with schizophrenia… a very complex condition, involving a constellation of diverse symptoms. Obviously this presents both a challenge and a constraint for figuring out the neurobiological root causes of it—if indeed it is caused by something *similar* to what affects you—brain lesions, that is. In the case of a schizophrenia diagnosis, there is likely not just one lesion but a number of lesions that are present across different brain regions that are the proximal causes for these symptoms."

"But I don't have schizophrenia," said Guano.

Doctor Manda tittered a bit. "It's the nearest thing, and my personal speciality of study."

She didn't need to ask. Schizophrenia. "And you're sure you can get rid of these nanobots?"

Doctor Manda hesitated. "I'm not sure of anything. This is experimental surgery being conducted aboard a British warship… who knows what could go wrong?"

“Okay,” said Guano, trying desperately not to think about that. “So what do you need me to do?”’

“Just tell me what you see,” said Doctor Manda. “If you can.”

“Okay.”

Something out of sight beeped softly, then Doctor Manda’s voice rose. “Okay. Engaging the device again in three, two, one—”

A jolt of energy ran through Guano, seizing her muscles and causing her whole body to spasm with pain. It faded after just a moment, a momentary spike, and she opened her mouth to say everything was fine.

Instead, she found herself sitting by a night-time campfire in the woods, a stick in her hand and a marshmallow on the other end. The thick smell of pine trees washed over her nose, and the stars above twinkled. The owls called…

“Hello again,” said Brooks—Spectre—sitting opposite her, the flames dancing and casting strange, lurid shadows across his face. “I wasn’t sure if you were coming back.”

Guano glared at him darkly. “Fuck you,” she spat. “You made me kill Roadie. Flatline. Betray my nation, betray my oath, and kidnap a *fucking baby*.” She hissed. “If a Spectre falls in the woods, does anyone give a shit?”

Brooks laughed. “Oh, calm down. You can no more harm me here than I can harm you. This isn’t even *your* fantasy.”

“Figures,” said Guano, venomously. “I’ve never been camping in my *life*. Especially not in this Yukon-looking shit hole.”

Brooks casually turned his marshmallow over, letting the embers roast the other side. “Like I said, this is a fragment of *my* memories. My real memories.” He laughed gently, as though the notion amused him somehow. “One time, when I was young and idiotic, I went camping with my buddies. It was my first time out of the cities really—of course today camping in a genuine forest is nearly impossible—and one of said buddies bought bear spray. Never even heard of the stuff before. So, I assumed it was like bug spray, and when I got the tent set up, I let rip with about half the can. While we were inside it.”

“I hope it really, really hurt,” said Guano dryly.

“Quite. But I did enjoy the wilderness, the outdoors, and while I was young, I always managed to find time to go be one with nature. If only for a little while. Even if I sometimes bear-maced myself.”

Guano grunted. “Okay. So what, shithead?” She shrugged helplessly. “So you maced yourself. Big deal. What’s the moral of the story?”

“Sometimes,” said Brooks, “you have to learn a lesson the hard way for it to stick.”

“What are you trying to say?” Guano demanded, chucking her marshmallow stick into the woods defiantly. “C’mon. Out with it. What’s the lesson?”

Brooks withdrew his perfectly browned treat from the fire, blowing on it gently. “How was prison?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes.

Brooks smiled at her. “All right. Here is your lesson: you can’t win. Not against me. Not against what I have and what I can do. My influence, my technology, *me*. You’re just pathetically outclassed in every single way.”

Rude. “You’ll find that we’re really resourceful. I wouldn’t write us off just yet.”

“Mmm. That remains to be seen, I suppose.” He regarded his snack. “Also, I was thinking. You did so well on your last job for me, I thought you might want another opportunity to prove yourself.”

“Fuck you. Suck a billion dicks and die.”

Brooks took a bite out of his marshmallow, chewing thoughtfully. “Did you know they never recovered Roadie and Flatline’s bodies?”

Guano narrowed her eyes at him. “So? They died on a junk world. *Because you made me shoot them*. I know they’re dead, asshole. I was there.”

Brooks took another bite. “You know, if you do a little favor for me, we can bring them back. Did you know that?”

She wanted to stab him with a snappy comeback, but nothing came. Instead, her heart thumped and her mind raced. She told herself that it was a trap, that she shouldn’t trust this monster. Of course she shouldn’t.

But how could she shake the thought? Roadie and Flatline… alive again…

Chapter Twenty-Three

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
Space, near Earth

Spears drummed her fingers on the armrest of her chair in frustration, watching the swarm of civilian ships descend upon the expanding debris field like a cloud of piranhas, cutting and devouring and stealing pieces of the wreckage.

"What do you mean" she asked, carefully and deliberately, "you *lost them*?"

"Just that, Ma'am," said Locke, swallowing apologetically. "Blackwood and Mattis's signals have vanished. Simultaneously. At the exact moment we detected that energy pulse from the piece they were salvaging. They were extremely close to it…extremely close."

Dammit. That kind of highly detectable, powerful energy burst would not do well for two humans out there. EVA suits were highly shielded, but even so—"You gotta give me more," Spears said, adjusting her collar. "Tell me more about this energy pulse. Describe its nature."

"Unknown, Ma'am," said Locke. "It was just… a big pulse of cross-band EM radiation. And we were probably not even scanning for it. We're a warship, Ma'am, not a science vessel. And the civilian scavengers are making it difficult to separate wreckage from suits."

Blast it all to hell. "Very well," she said. "Try to filter out the illegal salvagers if you can, and focus only on military assets. Have all other teams reported back safely?"

"Aye aye, Ma'am."

"Good. Ensure that whatever they managed to grab is secured and *untouched*. I don't want whatever happened to Blackwood and Mattis to happen to us." Now that her ship itself was sorted out, Spears needed to

take the next important step. “Send an SAR shuttle to pick them up. I want them found. Options?”

Ensign Locke thought for a moment. “Ma’am, we might be able to scan for their thermal signature. The sun’s light will warm them up, and reflect off their white EVA suits. It might be enough to pick them out from the rest of the debris.”

She shook her head. “No, that junk was just blown to kingdom come. It’ll still be hot from the explosion—whatever signal the reflected heat will give us will be lost.”

This was precisely Blackwood’s area of expertise. Spears was the warrior, the commander. Blackwood was the scientist. The thinker. That’s why they worked so well together, and without Blackwood, Spears was solving this problem without her better half.

“Any word from the scavs? Have any of them seen our wayward souls?”

“No Ma’am,” said Locke. “Not yet.”

She bit the inside of her cheek. Of course they wouldn’t say anything even if they had… of course they wouldn’t.

“Send out a transmission,” she said, finally. “Say there’s been a terrible tragedy and that the salvage is dangerous—not that they’ll listen—and offer ten thousand US dollars for each one of our team recovered. Fifteen thousand if they’re alive.” She groaned softly to herself. “And try to ward away the scammers. Tell them we *know* who’s our crew or not, so if they try to stuff some random bloke into a fifteen-year-old borrowed EVA suit, we’ll know.”

“Very well, Ma’am. Drafting a transmission now.”

Maybe it would help, or maybe it was a complete waste of their time. But she couldn’t just do nothing. “And keep scanning,” she said. “If I see even a squeak from their distress beacons, I want us on them like gravy on chips.”

“Absolutely, Ma’am.”

Spears sank into her chair, glaring despondently at the growing swarm of civilian ships. Even from their considerable distance, she could see the bright sparks of their cutting lasers, their grinders, their torches, searching and grabbing whatever they could.

Any intelligence they might divine from the wreck of the ship would be contaminated and limited at best, but at the moment, she was not even

concerned with that at all.

"Mattis, Blackwood, *come on*," she muttered to herself. "Where the devil are you?"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Cargo bay
Unknown Ship
Unknown Location

Mattis greedily gasped in a lungful of air and opened his eyes.

He was on a ship. A strange, dirty, cobbled-together ship. The cargo bay. Tables and benches lined the walls, haphazardly strewn with tools, half-completed projects, tools, and things which he could only classify as junk. Packed around them were cut metal sheets, more junk, and battle debris.

“Hey, wakey wakey!” said a guy crouching nearby, a pistol resting casually in his hand. He was dark skinned, sporting a thick stubble on his face and wearing a bomber jacket and aviator glasses that hid his eyes. From the few words the kid had spoken, Mattis thought he caught a pretty thick Indian accent. Mattis watched him wave the weapon around casually. “Wasn’t sure if you were going to be okay. Your face got chewed up pretty good,” the kid said.

Mattis propped himself up on his elbows. He was naked, his spacesuit thrown in a crude pile in the corner. His skin was covered in biofoam, giving him a kind of ‘clothing’ made of fluffy white bubbles. It also covered his face like shaving cream. Blackwood lay near him, similarly covered in gunk, her own spacesuit piled up against the wall. She was still unconscious. “What happened?”

“Yeah, well, I was kind of hoping *you* would be able to tell us that, you freaking alien piece of shit.”

“Alien?” Mattis stared at him. “What the hell are you saying?”

The stranger waved his pistol in Mattis’s general direction. He seemed vaguely familiar. “So, my brother and I were out performing humble salvage on the battle damage heroically scattered about the Sol system—the star system that cradled our species out of the primordial soup and to the

stars—and we're cleaning it up, like the noble patriotic humans we are, selflessly, like space janitors working for free." He paused. "Or, you know, standard scrap rates and whatever the US military will pay for recovered technology, which is actually *a lot*." Then he smiled. "And instead of juicy, juicy tech we find you. And your cute little girlfriend there. Both of you covered in ice and freeze-burns, wearing Royal space suits and all. Yet, somehow, alive."

Mattis groaned and rubbed his temples. "What the hell does—"

The guy pulled back the hammer on his pistol. "Don't think you're worth quite as much as a nice juicy piece of tech," he said, all the playfulness disappearing from his voice. "And that healing shit ain't cheap."

Would he *really* shoot? It seemed like a bluff, but Mattis couldn't be certain. "I'm sure," he said carefully, "that the Royal Navy will reimburse you for the cost of the foam. And I'm *also* sure there's plenty on this ship that you've recovered already. Threatening me won't help fill your wallets. And… I am grateful to you for saving us both."

"Hmm." The kid considered, then holstered his pistol. "Fair enough." He clapped his hands together, beaming. "So how much will the Royal Navy be paying me for you, huh?"

Mattis scowled. "Okay, listen. I'm an officer in the United States Navy. I'm out here on special assignment attached to the HMS *Caernarvon*. I'm sure you'll be well compensated in the end."

"Better be," he said.

"My compatriot here is Commander Blackwood, the XO of that ship."

"Commander *who* Blackwood*?*"

"Pardon?"

The guy jabbed his finger at Blackwood. "Her. The unconscious gal. If you work with her, what's her first name?"

Mattis searched his memory, trying to recall. There was something there, right on the tip of his tongue, but he wasn't sure whether he was remembering it or imagining it. And the man sounded so familiar, it was distracting. "I don't know. The military doesn't exactly operate on a first name basis."

"So you don't really know her at all," said the guy, drawing his gun again. "Guess you wouldn't mind if I shot her, then—"

“No,” said a voice from farther up the cargo bay. “Piss off, Harry. Nobody’s shooting anyone.” A younger kid in a wheelchair rolled through the doorway, glaring angrily at his shipmate. “Sorry. He watches too many movies.”

“Great,” said the bomber jacket kid, grinding his teeth. “Just handle the small talk, won’t you?”

“Yes,” said the wheelchair kid, “I will.” He rolled over to Mattis. “Sorry. My name is Sammy Reardon—” he swatted away the other’s attempts to gag him. “And this is my brother, Harry Reardon. And this ship is the Aerostar.”

The Aerostar. Mattis stared in bewilderment. The man who had found him was Reardon. Harry Reardon; the very man Spears was out here to find, the man who had carried a Maxgainz mutant in a box. The man who had returned Chuck to him.

He was a cocky little bastard.

“Fine,” groaned Reardon. “So I guess it *really is* you, isn’t it? You’re not a weird clone or something?”

Suddenly it all made sense. The guy was suspicious of him because he knew of the clones. “My name is *Captain* Jack Mattis of the United States Navy. And I’m not a clone.”

“Wow,” said Sammy. “That’s…” he stopped. “Wait, I didn’t recognize you because of the foam, but… aren’t you Chuck Mattis’s dad?”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Inside Guano's Head
Surgical Bay
HMS Caernarvon
Low Earth Orbit

Guano stared at Brooks—Spectre-Brooks, or hallucination-Brooks, or whatever he was—trying to process what he was saying. "Bring them… back?"

"Of course," said Brooks, as though he were discussing the idea of playing back a recording of their voices. "It's very much possible. I do it all the time."

She narrowed her eyes, simply unable to believe it. "That's something you do? You randomly *bring back the dead?*"

"In a manner of speaking," said Brooks, chewing thoughtfully on his marshmallow.

In a manner of speaking. Guano didn't believe in the human soul, or in any kind of spiritual force beyond a few nagging superstitions. "I'm guessing," she said, carefully, "that you mean that you can recover their DNA and copy their bodies, so that there's a kind of… you know, a copy of them that maybe has most or all of their memories, and looks like them, but isn't *actually* them. Just a copy of a person."

Brooks laughed and shook his head. "Oh goodness, no. No, no, no. The ethical implications of *that* have been long since discovered and solved. No, this is definitely a process by which the electro-biochemical reaction in the brain can be preserved, restarted, and restored into a new body. It's the same process I used to create my various copies of myself—but that, my dear, was *definitely* copying." He waggled a finger. "It's like a computer. It can copy and paste, or it can move. Just a little switch. Click!"

Guano waved a hand. "Okay, fine. Whatever. That is better, I'll give you that, but the point is, I don't care." She scowled. "And I've got questions for

you.”

“Shoot,” he said, delicately fixing another marshmallow onto the end of his stick.

“How are we even talking right now? Is this all just some kind of demented hallucination?”

Brooks smiled. “Oh, no, that would be telling.” As he spoke, the tip of his stick drooped, seeming to melt and disappear into the floor, his hand following it.

“Gross!”

He shrugged, smiling. “They’re pulling out the nanobots, obviously. That much is clear. So I’m afraid I’m going to be leaving you for good soon, my dear.”

Great. That suited her just fine. As she watched, his skin started to slough off his body, revealing a glowing blue, digital skeleton below it. Of course he wasn’t real… of course it was all fake… but it was still disturbing to watch. She racked her brain for questions.

“The President’s dead,” said Guano. “What do you know about that?”

Brooks smiled, the corner of his mouth sagging to the ground, leaving a gaping hole. “Might as well tell you: We had planned on replacing her with a clone under our control, like we controlled you, but she was stubborn, so… we had her removed instead. Admiral Yim knows more. Ask him when you find him.”

That didn’t make any sense. “Admiral Yim is one of your agents?”

“Oh, no,” said Brooks merrily, as his scalp fell off. All around Guano, the trees began sinking into the ground, the mountains disappearing and the stars winking out one by one. “But his clone was.”

Well, now. Just peachy. “How can I tell if someone’s a clone or not?”

He chortled as his mouth disintegrated entirely. “I would think you would know,” Brooks said as his body disappeared into goop. “Given you are one.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Cargo bay
Aerostar
Unknown Location

Wasn't he Chuck's dad?

Mattis found the answer to Sammy Reardon's question stuck in his throat.

"Yes," said Blackwood, beside him. "He is." She looked pretty awful, her face pale and caked in biofoam, but she was at least alive. And, apparently, she was talking now. "Surprised you didn't recognize him earlier."

"Of course I did," protested Reardon. "I just had to be sure, you know what I mean? I wasn't exactly expecting the guy to just be floating around in space. Could've been a clone. Or anyone."

Sammy glared at his brother. "Idiot," he said, then turned back to Mattis. "Hey… I'm really sorry."

Mattis sighed and put his head in his hands. "It's fine, and… yeah. I should have figured out who you two were earlier as well. Sorry. These last few months have just been a blur, and to be honest, it's still pretty fresh to me."

"Doesn't feel like he's really gone," said Sammy, folding his hands into his lap.

That was true. It really just felt like a vacation—like Chuck was waiting for him at home, with Elroy and the baby. "Mmm."

There was an awkward moment of silence.

"So," said Reardon, his tone business-like. "Does this affect the rescue fee, or—"

"Shut the hell up," hissed Sammy.

"Okay, okay." Reardon groaned out loud and threw up his hands. "I guess I won't *bother* trying to make us any money. It's not like we *need* it

or anything, I guess the damn ship can fix *itself!*" His voice dripped with sarcasm. "Don't need money, don't need parts, all we need is *good intentions* and a desire to help out whatever piece of space trash just decides to float along into our hull. Because, you know—"

"Hey." Blackwood cut in. "Look. Mister… Reardon, is it?" She pushed herself up into a sitting position, something Mattis thought was probably a terrible idea given her state, but she did it anyway. "Hail the *Caernarvon*. Tell them you found us and that we're okay, more or less. Tell them that you're going to return us in exchange for *compensation* and the use of the Royal Engineer Corps who, I'm sure, will gratefully and helpfully take the time to inspect whatever problems your ship might be having."

Mattis narrowed his eyes slightly. Reardon was mercenary, but Chuck had trusted him, and Chuck was always a good judge of character. Was he joking? Holding out for money? Surely he would not be so stupid as to *kidnap* a US Navy Captain?

Reardon mulled that over in his head. "Mmm, yeah, okay. Sure."

Sammy's chair chirped. He tapped the side of it, pulling a screen out of the armrest. "Hey, bro," he said, "we're getting a transmission from the *Caernarvon*. It's broadcasted openly…" he read, eyes widening. "Dude, they're promising ten thousand US dollars *each* for Mattis and Blackwood, fifteen if they're alive."

"Time to do the right thing, Sammy!" Reardon said brightly, clapping Mattis on the shoulder—sending a spike of pain leaping up his body. "Congrats, you're going home!" He stopped. "Wait, I still get the reward, right?"

"Glad you're doing the right thing," Blackwood said, in a commendable imitation of sincerity. "And… of course."

"Open the channel," Mattis said. "I wanna talk to Spears myself."

Reardon tsk-tsked and waggled a finger at him. "That might not be possible," he said, grinning like a cat. "We'll just have to see."

"Well, hurry up," Mattis said, grumbling. "My face hurts and I wouldn't mind actually getting real medical care."

"Jeez," Reardon said. "And I thought we were friends." He stood up, presumably to go talk to Spears, but Sammy's chair chirped again.

"Um," said Sammy, peering at the screen curiously. "Hey, Reardon?"

"Yeah?"

Sammy turned the screen around to show his brother. Exactly what, Mattis couldn't see. "We've got a big problem, bro."

"Oh shit," said Reardon, completely dropping his swagger. "Make the call. Get hold of the *Caernarvon.* Now!"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
Space, near Earth

Options. Spears needed options. She glared at the screen, at all the ships buzzing around. “Maybe we could perform random search-and-seizures,” she said. “That might work.”

“Communications are flooding in,” said Locke, scrolling across his console. “Look at this. Civilian after civilian saying they have our people, but none of them transmitting the proof-of-life I requested, and none of them seeming to know even basic information, like their first names.”

Spears scowled darkly. “This is the problem with illegal salvagers,” she said, trying to keep her tone in check. “Damn bastards are just out for a quick quid.”

Locke smiled his agreement. “We’ll find them, Ma’am. I’m sure of it.”

“As am I, but certainly not like this.” Anger flared up inside her. Why must everything go wrong? She needed Mattis’s help to find the *Aerostar*, and she didn’t have him. She needed Blackwood to find Mattis now, and she didn’t have her either.

She needed that blasted backup computer from the *Stennis*, not only to figure out why it had mysteriously turned on, but it most likely contained all the logs and security camera footage. She had trusted Captain Flint, but… *something* had brought him to a meeting room where the clone of Jeremy Pitt had shot Flint, blaming the actions on Chuck Mattis.

She needed to know if there were nanobots in Flint’s head. If *something* outside of his control had brought him to that room, had taken the man she trusted and led him to his death. The only thing it could be was the same *something* that had stolen Lieutenant Corrick’s will too. She needed to know, because the alternative was that Chuck had really shot him, or that Flint really had betrayed them.

And why the hell had the computer jerked to life when they had scanned it? What was *on* that thing? What had Spectre done to it in the short period of time he was in control of the *Stennis*?

Too many questions that needed answers.

"Thoughts, Mister Locke. What if we move the ship into the debris field? Scatter the scavs like roaches?"

"If we do that, we might risk colliding with the debris. Plus, it will affect our ability to scan if we're always moving around."

She knew that. Spears resisted the urge to thump her fist against the arm rest of her chair. A captain must always appear in control, calm, collected—

"—Ma'am, we're receiving another message. One that may be credible."

Spears grimaced. "I guess *may be credible* is what we've got to work with. Put them through."

The line crackled faintly as the connection was made. A smooth, confident voice in an Indian accent came over the radio. "Hello, *Caernarvon*? This is Harry Reardon of the Aerostar, and I heard you've been looking for me."

Spears felt her eyes nearly pop out. "I most certainly have," she said, trying not to betray too much of her enthusiasm. "For quite some time, actually. I don't suppose you could tell me which one of these…" she almost said *criminal scum*, but fortunately caught the words in her mouth before they spilled out. "Enterprising crews you're part of, would you? So we can come over and chat?"

Reardon's skepticism was clear. "So you can dispatch a shuttle full of Marines to come cut a hole in the hull and arrest us all?"

She kept her tone level. "Arrest you for what, my good chap? Surely, if you have recovered our missing crewmen, then you'd be eager to turn them over to us out of the goodness of your hearts—and as we said, we're more than happy to compensate you for your time, and for the potential for lost salvage."

"Not sure fifteen-thousand each will cover that," said Reardon. In the background, a voice berated him in Hindi, but Spears barely understood more than a few words. "Might need a bit more."

How tiresome. Spears touched her forehead. "I want proof of life," she said, flatly. "Put one of them on the line."

There was a brief pause, and then Blackwood's voice came down the line. "Evening, Captain."

The sound of her XO's voice bought a genuine smile to Spears's face that simply could not be suppressed. "Evening, Blackwood. Bloody good to hear your voice once more."

"The same for you, Captain."

Satisfied, Spears muted the call. "Mister Locke, have a boarding party standing by, but don't open the hangar bay doors yet or give any indications we're doing anything untoward."

He nodded his acknowledgement.

"You there?" asked Reardon, an edge of affable cheekiness creeping into his voice. "I can tell when I'm put on hold, you know."

She touched the mute button. "It's quite all right, Mister Reardon. I'm merely running a warship here, which requires a certain amount of multitasking. As you are probably aware, there's a lot of civilian traffic in the area."

"Yeah, about that," said Reardon. In the background of the call, spears heard a faint rumble and the wailing of various alarms. What the devil was going on? "We kind of have a *situation* here. Could use your help, Captain."

Spears met Locke's eyes. He shrugged. She shrugged too. "Okay," she said, cautiously. "How can we help you, Mister Reardon?"

"Well…" Reardon sighed. "There's another scavver—pardon, enterprising gentleman here—who saw us pick up your crew, and he's moving in to claim—I mean steal—what he feels is yours, which is to say, *my* ship and my cargo, which is *your* crew."

Typical scavs. Spears ground her teeth. "Very well, identify your ship, provide targeting information, and we'll provide fire support. Just enough to chase them off."

Suddenly, Reardon perked right up. "Here you go, love! Sammy—Sammy! Send through the data! Now! Yes, right now!"

Locke's console lit up. "Fire support information received," he said.

"Very good, Mister Locke. Fire a warning shot across the bow of the hostile ship, see if we can scare them off."

"Confirmed," said Locke, tapping some keys, his fingers striking triumphantly. "Single shot, tracer, vectoring for one kilometer in front of their cockpit. Should be clear as day."

"Fire," said Spears.

A single round leapt from their forward gun, a pyrotechnic charge igniting as it left the barrel, leaving an extremely visible bright streak across space. It disappeared like the finger of a giant poking at a distant spot in the black, and the ship's cameras moved to track it.

The round flew directly towards a tiny ship, one unpainted and cobbled together from old shipping crates, a truly DIY job wildly maneuvering in the depths of space, spouting streams of gunfire toward a target off-camera.

Locke's shot seemed perfectly aimed, angled to fly right by the cockpit, but right at the last moment, the ship surged forward, its engines flaring a bright blue against the black backdrop.

The tracer round smacked into the cockpit, ricocheting and bouncing off into the darkness.

"Sorry, Ma'am," said Locke, grimacing.

"No worries," said Spears, watching as the ship banked and burned their engine, accelerating away from the battle. "Looks like they're rabbiting. So, perfectly aimed, I will say."

"Thank you, Ma'am."

Spears sighed and touched her wrist-computer. "There you go, Reardon," she said. "Now return my people."

"Of course," said Reardon, with relief. "But um, hey… you promise you won't arrest me?"

No promises, she thought, but didn't say. "If you promise you don't give me *cause* to arrest you, you'll find me a perfectly amicable host." She shifted in her seat, pursing her lips. "But just some food for thought while you make your way here: I need to ask you something important."

"Shoot?" asked Reardon. "Don't *literally* shoot, but… ask away."

Spears took a breath. "I know you recovered a piece of salvage from the *Stennis*," she said, choosing her words very carefully. "I—I need to ask you some questions about it, and about what happened to it."

"Right," said Reardon, his tone suddenly shifting. "Well, that's mine, so I think we'll just deliver your dudes and go."

"You'll be well compensated for its return."

"The salvage is not for sale," said Reardon, with a strange edge of finality to it. Something dark and serious in his normally jovial, playful voice.

Spears very much did not want to let this go, but without Blackwood and Mattis back aboard, she had no leverage. "As you wish," she said. She

was tempted—so tempted—to push about the computer but thought better of it. The lives of her crew came first. “Hangar bay is open.”

“Right,” said Reardon. “Hangar bay. No tricks, or, I swear, I’ll put a bullet in your XO’s gut before you have the chance to shit your pants.”

Lovely. “No tricks,” said Spears. “*Caernarvon* out.”

She closed the connection, then looked to Locke. “Keep that boarding party standing by, just in case.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Surgical Ward 1
Infirmary
HMS Caernarvon
Low Earth Orbit

Guano woke up in the surgical ward, her body caked in sweat. The strange machine hovered over her, still lit up and studying her.

"Are you okay?" asked Doctor Manda.

Was she? That was a good question. The ghost of Brooks's voice echoed in her ears. She was a clone. Was that true?

What had she even experienced? Was it just a hallucination? Had she imagined it all, or was she *communicating* with Brooks? Or with one of his clones? Had he survived being shot by her?

So many questions. Questions she knew, in some way, she would likely never truly receive answers to.

"I think so," she said, her face dripping with sweat. "I… I kinda experienced a really powerful hallucination, lasting right from when you activated the thing until just now. I was seeing some crazy shit. Dead people talking to me, a campfire in the woods, and something *really* trippy when—I presume—you started to pull the little bastards out of my head." She smiled weakly. "But you got rid of them, right?"

Doctor Manda moved into view, holding up a test tube filled with a thimbleful of sludgy grey liquid. "This should be all of them," she said, smiling brightly. "We checked six times. Couldn't see any activity even on the highest setting. Now we just gotta close you back up, and we're done here. Don't worry, we'll be keeping you totally sedated for the process."

"Close me… up?"

Smiling lightly, Doctor Manda picked up a mirror and held it up, showing Guano the top of her head. Her scalp had been removed, the skull

beneath it as well, and the vein-streaked grey matter of her brain was fully exposed.

"Oh," she said, staring in bewilderment at her own brain. "That's neat. My little… brain-thingie right there. Just chilling."

"Mmm hmm. Brain-thingie. Poetry." Doctor Manda put the mirror away. "So, you might be experiencing a whole host of symptoms. Weakness, dizzy spells, poor balance; this comes from having your skull removed. But if you start to experience personality changes, confusion, speech problems or seizures—complex or total—report to the infirmary straight away, okay?"

"No worries, Doc," she said. Her second question snagged in her throat. "I…" She had to say it. When her mind had been addled, she had often tried to 'break out' and say things, to fight for control… and couldn't. So she forced herself now. "I had a conversation with a clone of some dead guy."

Doctor Manda blinked in confusion. "You spoke to someone while you were under?"

"Yeah. That's right. I wasn't sure if it was a hallucination or not, but… I wanted to ask what you thought. You're the doctor after all, and I'm laying here with my brain hanging out having a chat with Spectre."

"You most certainly are," said Doctor Manda, pausing a moment to consider. Guano thought the next question would be *who is Spectre?*, but it wasn't. "The truth is… we don't know, but it does seem promising that you were able to mention his name."

Guano raised an eyebrow.

"I read your report and court transcripts in preparation for the surgery. You mentioned that name in your statements."

Right. Well. "Okay," she said, getting to the real point. "Do you think it's possible he was communicating with me? Through the dream somehow?"

"Didn't you shoot him?"

She wanted to nod but couldn't. "Yes."

"Right, so I think," said Doctor Manda, slowly, "that it's unlikely you were receiving any kind of new information while you were under. It's more likely that your brain was constructing a hypothetical situation—something that you feared, on some level, would come true. And the *thing* you imagined in there was only saying what you unconsciously wanted him to say." Doctor Manda looked away for a moment. "That said, we simply

cannot discount the possibility it was real communication. With the nanobots out, it shouldn't happen again, but if it does… report it straight away."

"Yup. Absolutely, definitely will do." She smiled. "Okay, Doc. Enough being *open-minded* today. Better put my brain back in."

Doctor Manda smiled widely. "Okay, we'll close you up. We'll make sure you're sedated during the process, and I promise you won't feel a thing. Nurse?"

A sturdy male nurse carrying a massive syringe approached in Guano's periphery. She wanted to protest, but the next thing she knew, a rush of cold was filling her veins. She tried to focus on what Doctor Manda had said. How could she possibly be a clone? And with the nanobots removed, she would be fine. Right?

As the nurse started up the bone stitcher, there was still a niggling doubt echoing around in Guano's head, but she hoped it would just fall out of the open part of her skull. That was how ideas worked, right?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Cargo bay
Aerostar
Inside the Caernarvon’s *hangar bay*

Mattis gingerly put his suit back on and acutely felt that the biofoam’s painkiller effect had worn off. Pulling the pants up over his naked self was a trial; every time the metal touched his skin, it stung, but he knew that as uncomfortable as that was, it was going to be a lot worse to be exposed to the vacuum of a decompressed shuttle bay.

Blackwood, to her credit, seemed to bear with the pain more easily than he, and didn’t seem to be bothered by his nakedness—or her own. She was fully suited up and ready to go before he finished getting into his pants.

“You doing okay?” he asked. “How are your burns?”

“They’re fine,” said Blackwood. “Nothing an analgesic won’t fix once we’re back on board. It’s just pain, it’s fleeting.”

Mattis smiled. He couldn’t help but admire her ability to shrug off all that skin damage. His own body was tingling pretty bad, and he knew that once the medication fully wore off, he’d be in agony—but Blackwood was so much worse off than he was, and yet, seemingly dealing with it a lot better. “Well… you’re doing very well, anyway.”

Blackwood tugged on her helmet, sealing it. “In the submarine corps, sailors would train for coolant leaks in a starship reactor. Which was a fun exercise. If you were hurt during this kind of thing, your injury would depend on whether the leak was coming from the evaporator end or the condenser end of the system. Both would horrifically scald your average crewman with an extremely toxic chemical, but one instance might be incredibly hot while the other instance was incredibly cold. So this is nothing.”

“Sounds horrific,” Mattis grumbled. He checked his own helmet and suit. Intact.

“Because it is. Being a submariner is a *simple* job that’s not an *easy* job. Your every move is dedicated to making sure that the number of ‘surfaces’ equals the number of ‘dives’.”

“Mmm. A noble goal,” he said. Although antiquated, he was glad that the Royal Navy’s submarines continued to serve, both on Earth and on other worlds. The British public was heavily against giving them up. Britannia Rules The Waves, after all.

Without further ado, the loading ramp lowered, venting the cargo bay’s atmosphere out into space, the air rushing past them as it fled the confines of the Aerostar.

Beyond the loading ramp were five armed Marines, their faces obscured, and a central figure standing in front of them whom, he guessed, was Spears. He cycled through his radio frequencies until he found one open. “Captain Spears,” he said.

“Admiral Mattis,” replied Spears warmly. “Good to see you again.”

Mattis jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “I found the Aerostar for you,” he said, grinning, though his face was likely obscured. “Through sheer dumb luck. And also because Blackwood blew herself up.”

“Technically speaking,” said Blackwood, “I blew both of us up.”

“Right. Well, anyway, Reardon’s complaining about wanting to be paid, so I suggest that you do so… half in advance, half after that overblown peacock tells you what he knows about the Avenir.”

“I’m a woman of my word,” said Spears, slightly put out. “He returned you to us. He’ll be paid in full and sharpish. As for the Avenir… I have something he might want in exchange for that information.”

Was Reardon’s experience really *that* important? There must be something else at play here. Best not talk about the backup. Mattis took a step down the loading ramp. “Right, well, he’s eager to get going, so I suggest you make your offer soon. He, uh, can hear you by the way.”

“I’d almost be offended if he couldn’t.” Spears cleared her throat. “So, Harry Reardon, I’m prepared to pay you now, once I have your account details.”

Reardon coughed over the line. “Yeah, no, sorry love. It’ll have to be cash. Reputable businessmen like me don’t exactly have, you know, bank accounts.”

“Oh,” said Spears. “That’s a tragic shame, because my ships don’t carry cash in such large amounts. Why would we need to?” She clicked her

tongue. “So sad.”

“Hey,” said Reardon, angrily. “You said you would pay me.”

“Correct, but I did not specify the way in which I would do so,” said Spears. Mattis could hear the smile in her voice. “Perhaps a trade, then? I can have my engineers effect some repairs on your ship, and I *do* have an extra Type 66-B Z-space engine that’s compatible with practically any kind of ship. It’s got a defective coolant coil, but you could just install the one you have, so I’m sure I could be easily convinced to part with it.”

Reardon was practically drooling down the line. “A Type 66-B? That actually works?”

“Type 66-B,” said Spears. “Practically brand new. Apart from the coolant coil.”

Clever girl. The Type 66-B was a top of the line Z-space engine, the fastest around by a long margin, but it had a rarely known flaw—it would blow its coolant coils on the regular. It would also emit a radiation that would make it exceptionally easy to trace.

Mattis only knew about it because the military had approved the Type 66-B for use in its warbirds, then had discovered the issue and kept it classified.

Reardon said nothing for a while, obviously mulling over the trade. Then, finally, he spoke up. “Lady, you got yourself a deal.”

Mattis adjusted his radio so he was only talking to Spears. “You’re really going to give him an engine?”

“One moment, Mister Reardon. I just have to check something.” There was a faint hiss as she changed frequencies. “That’s correct,” said Spears over their private line. “Because I suspect that Reardon knows about the problem with the Type 66-B, and I suspect that he knows a way to fix it. Or at least mitigate it. But that’s not my concern. Installing the engine will require access to his ship and his ship’s computers, and that’s what I *really* want. Because if they have a copy of that backup, that’s where it’ll be.”

Very clever girl indeed. All she *really* wanted was the computer.

“So I have it?” asked Reardon.

Spears fiddled with her wrist-mounted computer, then answered over their shared line. “Yes.”

Reardon laughed into their ears. “Suckers.”

Chapter Thirty

Conference Room 3
HMS Caernarvon
Sol system

For the first time since they had left Earth, despite his injuries, Mattis felt like things were going their way.

Blackwood went to sickbay, and so did Mattis. They were both slathered with more foam, but after it had done its work, the doctors allowed them to return to duty.

On the way back to Spears, Mattis fetched Blair from her quarters. She seemed concerned for his burns, but happy to be out of her room and, at least for now, much less space-sick. The Aerostar was locked down in the hangar bay and the Royal engineers went to work on it, cutting and welding and preparing to install the new engine.

In the interim, Spears had apparently shepherded the crew of the Aerostar into a spare conference room. Just somewhere to keep them distracted while they worked, and by the time Mattis returned to them, there was a heavy air of boredom clinging to both of the brothers.

“Who’s that?” said Reardon, jabbing a finger at Blair.

“Denelle Blair,” said Mattis, delicately leaving off the *Special Agent* part. “She’s… assisting us.” He sat in one of the empty chairs, and Blair sat next to him.

“So hey,” said Reardon to Spears, for what Mattis assumed was not the first time. “When’s my ship going to be ready?”

“Well,” said Spears, patiently. “A full Z-space engine replacement is going to take some time. Two days at least, maybe three. In the meantime, we can assign you temporary quarters and make sure you’re comfortable.”

“I do like being comfortable,” said Reardon, grinning like some kind of mutant cat.

“He does,” said Sammy.

Spears nodded politely. “And I have to confess: military ships are not exactly wheelchair accessible. But we’ll do whatever we can to make you comfortable, too.”

Sammy nodded appreciatively, but his smile quickly fell.

“You okay, son?” asked Mattis.

“Not really.” He ran his hands along the armrests of his wheelchair. “You’re giving us a fifty-million dollar engine, practically brand new, for what? Returning two military crewmen who we had a clear obligation to return anyway?”

“No we didn’t,” Reardon butted in, waggling his finger. “We did it out of the goodness of our hearts. No obligation.”

It was difficult to tell whether or not Reardon was bluffing; it was insane to Mattis that the kid would consider actually kidnapping senior military personnel from the US and British Navies. But he was also apparently in desperate need of cash. It had to be a bluff.

Sammy seemed to ignore his brother’s blabbering. “The bounty was only thirty-thousand. How did that go from thirty G’s to fifty mil?” Sammy shook his head. “No, something’s not right here. You want something else.”

Spears leveled her gaze at him. “Perceptive kid,” she said. “The truth is that you are correct, Mister Reardon.”

“That’s me,” said Harry Reardon, pointing to himself.

“Harry’s your first name,” said Sammy, a clear edge of exhaustion in his voice. “My last name is *also* Reardon.”

“Anyway,” said Spears. “Yes. Correct on both counts. The point is: you are correct.” She took a shallow breath. “I need to see the computer you salvaged from the *Stennis*.”

“I told you,” said Reardon, “it’s not for sale.”

“Everything is for sale,” said Spears, politely.

“Not this.” Reardon looked directly at him. “After the last battle, where Chuck…” he stopped, voice trailing away. “W-where Chuck was there, we scavved a computer from the wreckage of the *Stennis*. It had a whole bunch of stuff on it. Stuff like you wouldn’t believe… we’d only just scratched the surface looking at it, but we could tell right away it was incomplete.”

More memories of Chuck. He pushed them down, and away. Couldn’t focus on them now. “What kind of stuff?” asked Mattis.

Reardon didn’t answer right away. Whatever it was had obviously disturbed him.

Sammy leaned over to his brother. “You can tell them,” he said, quietly.

“It’s a list of things,” snapped Reardon, giving his brother a playful shove. “I dunno what it was precisely. Just *lists*. Sammy was working on a theory and I’m not sure on the details, but… he knew it was about cloning. Honestly, I wanted to just scrap it and sell the metal, but then the bloody thing just woke up. Turned itself on. No power source or anything. I was afraid it had sent out a beacon. So we executed a Z-space translation. But it was just turning itself on, I think.”

“So you ran,” said Spears, thoughtfully. “Why didn’t you come back?”

“Because I didn’t know who to trust.”

“I know that feeling,” said Mattis.

Spears leaned forward slightly. “I need to examine that computer. I need it to answer that very vital question, the very same one you are: can people be trusted? How do we know? How can we prevent what happened there from happening here?”

“Okay,” said Reardon, grumpily. “Fine. I’ll…*give* it to you access to what’s on the computers. But I want Sammy to be the one who analyzes it. You can have a copy of the data, but Sammy opens it, Sammy figures out what it is.”

“That’s fair,” said Spears.

Reardon smirked. “And I want something else. Not money.”

“Very well, what is it you want?”

“I want to help you. I want…” he puffed out his chest. “I wanna have a Han Solo moment. Where I become everyone’s hero forever.”

Spears’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “Han…?” The old reference was lost on her.

“Solo,” Reardon repeated.

“Oh god,” muttered Sammy.

Mattis bit his tongue to keep the response in check.

“Also I want a uniform,” said Reardon, grinning like a moron. “I always thought I’d look sick in one.”

“We’ll see about the uniform,” said Spears, evenly. “But we’d certainly welcome your help.” Spears’s eyes flicked to Blair. “And since you asked, we actually could use your help to locate a certain individual.”

“Okay,” said Sammy. He seemed, at least, to be treating the request seriously. “Who are you looking for?”

Blair spoke up. “Admiral Yim of the People’s Republic of China Army Navy.”

Sammy shrugged, glancing to his brother. “Who the heck is that?”

“The man who shot the President of the United States,” said Blair.

“Oh, damn,” said Reardon, eyes widening. “The American President is dead?”

Mattis nodded. “Happened about six hours ago. President Jameson was sworn in…” he checked his communicator. “Oh, not long ago now.”

Reardon looked back and forth between Mattis, Blair, and Spears, searching. Then he just whistled, settling back in his seat. “Well, ain’t that some shit, hey? Guess I picked the right time to help out.”

Mattis let the disrespectful comment slide.

“The point is,” said Blair, “we need to locate Yim. I’ve heard you can do that.”

Reardon seemed confused. “I don’t even know the guy. Why don’t you ask the Chinese Navy? Or their version of the FBI or whatever?”

Blair opened her mouth to speak up, but then closed it, clearly thinking better of identifying herself as a federal agent.

Sammy shrugged. “Yeah. Anyway, he’s not onboard our ship,” he said, a little snark creeping into his demeanor. “A fact I’m sure you were eager to discover for yourselves. What, you think every guy on the run from the law is hiding out in our cargo compartment or something?”

“You did,” said Spears, “have an Avenir aboard your vessel for some time.”

Both Sammy and Reardon’s faces fell.

“Well… not exactly. She was made in one of Specter’s labs. Here. In the present,” said Sammy, bitterly. “But she’s gone now, so there’s no… sense bringing up the past like that. No sense talking about what we cannot change.” He looked right at Mattis. “You know what I’m talking about, yeah?”

True enough. Mattis hadn’t talked to anyone besides President Schuyler and a few select, trusted Admirals about the exact circumstances of Chuck’s death. How he must have somehow convinced Lily to punch a few holes in the *Stennis*’s reactor, saving the entire Tiberius system in the process. A deathly quiet came over the room; nobody wanted to mention the elephant in it.

Finally, Spears broke the spell. “Right. Well, with that in mind, we could really use your help in finding Admiral Yim. Given the politically sensitive nature of this incident, and the fact we’ve somewhat overpaid for your services, I think you owe us that much at least.”

Reardon stared. “How can *we* help *you?*”

“You’re… shady,” said Spears. “And, from what I’ve read about you, somewhat good at finding people who do not want to be found.”

“Yeah,” said Sammy, rubbing his hands together. “Look. To be honest, we found Bratta hiding out on some shit hole little world in the Tiberius sector… because, yeah. There are only a few places in the galaxy that are simultaneously developed enough for someone with no survival skills to hide out in, yet underdeveloped enough—or crazy enough—to not have security cameras and monitoring systems everywhere that will, you know, discover you.”

“Chrysalis, or Tiberius,” said Spears, nodding to Sammy. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“Aye,” said Sammy. “And I was thinking… definitely Chrysalis. We have a bunch of leads there. Contacts, you know? People we can talk to, people who we trust and more importantly, trust us. You guys could search for a million years and never find what we can find. If he’s anywhere, he’s there. And we can find him.” He smiled to Reardon. “For more money.”

“In exchange for more money,” said Reardon, firmly. “And also the engine. And also a uniform and being a hero and all that.”

Mattis turned the proposal over in his head. It seemed like a fair trade. Reardon had been paid for his services, and with that settled, he’d volunteered to help the *Caernarvon* find Yim. Given what a chaotic, criminal underworld-type place Chrysalis was, that help would be very valuable.

It was… odd… convenient, almost, to him that so much of the galaxy’s goings-on involved these two smuggler brothers and Yim. Mattis couldn’t quite shake the nagging doubt that someone was pulling his strings. That he was being *guided* toward the Reardons, then *guided* onward to some other, unknowable goal.

He was getting paranoid in his old age.

“Of course,” said Spears, a warm smile perfectly hiding her true feelings. She never failed to impress. “I’ll make sure the data is copied over, and then plot us a course.”

“Okay, but Sammy gets to work on it.”

“That’s the deal,” said Spears.

Reardon pointed at Blair. “So, who’s she? Don’t think I haven’t let the fact she’s not in uniform go unnoticed.”

There didn’t seem to be much reason to hide the truth anymore. “Special Agent Denelle Blair is with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, looking into the president’s murder.”

Reardon’s face darkened. “Don’t say anything to her,” he said to Sammy. “Cops. Just great…”

Sammy groaned and rolled his eyes. “Quiet.”

Yeah, thought Mattis, *maybe I should have kept my mouth shut.…*

Chapter Thirty-One

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
Z-space

Mattis broke for food, rest, and another visit to the sickbay. It was a simple affair; bandages and painkillers, nothing too serious. He sat through a shift change, then returned to duty. By the time he got back to the bridge, Blackwood—her arms swathed in bandages, but otherwise looking none the worse for wear—was waiting for him, seated in the CO's chair.

"The Captain is having a kip," said Blackwood, smiling professionally in response to his unasked question. "Even she needs rest sometimes. How are our guests?"

"Oh, they're fine," said Mattis. "Loud-mouthed and bored, only interested in how much coin and hardware they can drag out of the government. But that's what we have taxpayers for, isn't it?"

"They're troopers, surely."

"Mmm. And how are you?"

Blackwood managed a brave smile. "About as good as you are, I bet. Sore, and I'm going to need a few weeks sick leave when this is all done. But modern technology is wonderful. Biofoam is *great*."

It definitely was. "They say it gives you cancer," said Mattis.

"So does beer and steak and everything else good in the world."

Fair enough. Mattis moved to stand beside her. "Any word on what the hell happened to us?"

"The Devil knows, but I don't think he's ready to give up his secrets just yet. It's looking like, at this stage, it's less likely to be a bomb or trap or something, and more likely that I…" she grimaced sheepishly. "Probably broke whatever futuristic cooling device was keeping those bodies cold."

"Oops," said Mattis.

Blackwood rubbed her shoulder ruefully. “Hopefully we’ll find out what’s going on when we get to Chrysalis. It seems like the secrets of the galaxy can be found on that tiny little rock.”

“Mmm. It’s amazing the kinds of things that can happen when you take away government interference and regulations.”

Blackwood raised an eyebrow. “Surely you don’t believe that.”

“I have mixed opinions about it,” said Mattis. “Look. There is a lot to be said for liberty and doing what you want. But a key component of that is the need for structure, order, and fairness. You can buy anything on Chrysalis—*anything*. But this is the critical thing… just because you *can* do something, doesn’t mean you *should*.” He hesitated. “It’s great in theory. Not so great in practice.”

“Right.” Blackwood smiled. “You should know, your pilot—Corrick—is out of surgery and it looks like it was a rousing success.”

Anger.

Some part of him hoped that Corrick hadn’t made it. It was a terrible thought to think, but he couldn’t help himself. “I’ll see her as soon as I can,” he said, forcing the dark thoughts out of his head. “Chrysalis was the first place we saw the mutants, and she was abducted there, yet managed to escape. She might be able to help us.”

Blackwood didn’t seem convinced. “It might have to wait until after we dock,” she said. “Corrick is in good hands… and she’s strong… but she just underwent brain surgery. She can’t be briefed right now.”

Begrudgingly, Mattis conceded. “Hmmph. No need for me to go poking my nose around, getting involved in things I can’t fix or change.”

“Good show,” said Blackwood, approvingly.

Hours ticked away in relative silence as the HMS *Caernarvon* sailed on through the multi-spectral hue that was Z-space, where the coordinates of the strange dimension did not match up evenly with the coordinates of real space. The travel time, therefore, to places like Chrysalis varied wildly; sometimes a week, sometimes a few days, sometimes much shorter or longer.

Throughout the trip, doubts chewed at him. Maybe, despite Blackwood’s misgivings, he should go see Lieutenant Corrick right away during the transit. Spectre had warned him of a threat coming. In Mattis’s grief these last months, he had nearly forgotten the interchange. He certainly hadn’t had the balls to actually speak to Corrick about it face to

face. He kicked himself now for not having thought it through—made any conjectures.

Now the thought of Spectre gnawed at the back of his mind. And Corrick *did* know the terrain of Chrysalis… Mattis resolved to see her as soon as he was able. He was going to swallow his pride or grief or whatever was paralyzing him in that kid's presence.

"Commander Blackwood," said one of their bridge officers, "we are coming up on Chrysalis."

Well, that was fast. No time, then. "Should we get Spears up here?"

"Good idea. I'll wake her up." She touched her radio. "Blackwood to Spears."

There was a pause—an uncharacteristically long pause which suggested that Captain Spears was asleep—and then she came through, her voice just a little foggier than usual. "Spears here. Send it."

"We are coming up on Chrysalis, Ma'am. We're reading a lot of traffic around the asteroid, but nothing too heavy. Thought you should know."

"Put the kettle on and make sure it's piping hot, I'm on my way."

Mattis smiled as Blackwood closed the connection. "I think, sometimes, that that woman drinks far too much tea."

Blackwood put on a mock look of horror. "If she heard you say that, she'd throw you out the nearest airlock. The Captain treats her hot beverages *very* seriously."

Clearly.

The casement to the *Caernarvon's* bridge opened and Spears stepped through, flanked by a pair of Marines. Despite having obviously slept in her uniform, neither it nor she looked any the worse for wear.

"Captain on the bridge," crowed the ship's bosun. The words still felt alien, not referring to him as they were. He hadn't heard them since… a lifetime ago.

"Report," said Spears.

Blackwood vacated Spears's seat, moving to stand in her customary spot to the side of the chair. "We're two minutes away from a Z-space translation into real-space. It should put us at the designated arrival point for Chrysalis." She paused a moment. "We tried to call ahead to signal our intention, but it looks like they didn't pick up, per usual."

Typical Chrysalis. They hated the military there—all militaries equally—so the fact that whoever was responsible for manning their long-range

comms was not answering the call was not entirely unexpected. If they even had someone doing that job at all.

“Not to bother,” said Spears. “They’ll talk to us when we arrive, I’m sure.”

“That or they’ll just do nothing and let their gravity mine field destroy us.”

“Always a possibility,” said Spears, as comfortably as though she was discussing an afternoon thunderstorm.

The minutes ticked by. Bridge activity picked up, with the crew working to bring the ship back into reality. With a surge of power, the multicolored rainbow world of Z-space was replaced with a black canvas dotted with stars. There, not too far distant from their ship, was the massive asteroid that was Chrysalis.

Immediately, alarms and warning chimes rang out around the bridge.

“Radar contact,” said one of the bridge officers. “Belay that, multiple contacts! I’m reading seven—no, nine ship contacts. They’re close, too.”

“We’re being painted,” said Blackwood. “They’re locking us up.”

Damn. What the hell had they gotten themselves into?

“Identify those ships,” said Spears, raising her voice to be heard over the din. “Quickly, Commander Blackwood, if you please!”

Blackwood worked at her XO’s console. “They’re squarking IFF, translating now.” She frantically scrolled through her screens. “Those… those are Chinese ships! And they’re about to fire!”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
Z-space

Mattis hadn't seen so many Chinese ships since the war. All around them, in a rough hemisphere, were nine Chinese warships, their guns menacingly pointed directly at them.

Felt just like old times.

"Mattis?" asked Spears, cautiously. "Opinion. You're the one with the most experience facing down the Chinese here. Should we open hailing frequencies and speak with these doubtfully friendly new acquaintances, or should we charge our Z-space drive and beat a hasty retreat?"

So many memories. Memories of a war that took place before almost everyone in the room, save Captain Spears, was born.

"Lemme talk to them," he said, taking in a deep, calming breath. Anger rose in him and he fought it. That war was long over. "Yim and I were able to develop a rapport despite our… history. I think I can do the same here."

Spears gestured to her comms officer who opened a channel.

"This is Captain Jack Mattis"—he still said it slowly each time to make sure to use the correct rank—"of the United States Navy," he said, putting on his best captain's voice and forcing the past out of his mind. He had a job to do, here and now, and it wouldn't do him any good for his mind to be somewhere else.

"I'm here with Captain Pippa Spears of the Royal Navy, and we're investigating the assassination of the President of the United States, as well as gathering intelligence about the Avenir and the man known as Spectre." He smiled to himself, even though the audio-only transmission wouldn't show it, it always helped. "You fine folk seem to be surprisingly confrontational about this. Is there a blockade of Chrysalis in place we were not aware of? Some kind of tax problem, maybe?"

“A tax problem, naturally,” muttered Blackwood, soft enough that he hoped they didn’t hear.

There was no immediate reply. Mattis started to wonder if the transmission had gone through, but then a woman’s voice came through in heavily accented English. “This is Captain Mei-Yin Long of the People’s Republic of China Army Navy, Commanding Officer of the *Tiantai Shan*. Please be advised that we are currently engaged in an internal matter on behalf of the People’s Republic. You are hereby ordered to engage your Z-space engines and translate to an area of real-space no closer than one hundred AU away from Chrysalis station.”

Not a tax problem, then. “*Tiantai Shan*, solid copy on your last,” he said, carefully acknowledging that he had heard it, but not that he was about to comply. “Politely request that you allow us 48 hours to conduct our investigation on Chrysalis, and we remind you once again that this is a Royal Navy vessel. We have no quarrel with you, *Tianai Shan*. Just let us go about the asteroid. We won’t get in your way.”

Blackwood cut in. “They’re opening their missile bay doors,” she said, her voice charged with energy. “They could fire at any second.”

It was a bluff. The Chinese knew that British sensors could detect missile bay door openings; it was the equivalent of a bank robber waving a gun around. Shooting wasn’t their objective. “They’re just sending us a message,” he said.

“*Caernarvon*, *Tianti Shan* actual. State the nature of your investigation.”

He muted the call. “What should I tell them?”

“The truth,” said Spears.

So he did. “*Tianti Shan*, this is the *Caernarvon*. We are seeking Admiral Yim and have compelling evidence which suggests that he is involved in the assassination of the President of the United States of America.”

There was another pause. Mattis could only speculate as to why. Then, finally, Captain Long’s voice returned. “Do you have a warrant?”

He almost laughed out loud. Fortunately he kept his tongue in check. “Jurisdiction on Chrysalis is unestablished,” he said.

“Not in the eyes of the People’s Republic,” Long shot back. “We, after all, installed the gravity mines that protect this place.”

That was true enough. “Well, we do have a sworn officer aboard—a special agent of the Californian field office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who is currently investigating President Schuyler’s murder.

I’m certain she has the right to investigate Chrysalis on our behalf, especially given the highly unusual nature of recent events. All with your consent, of course.”

Captain Long snorted derisively down the line. “You have a special agent from *California?* As in, Earth? Not the intergalactic branch?”

“Believe it or not, we do. What do you have?” asked Mattis, his smile wavering slightly. “If you don’t have a sworn officer aboard, maybe we can lend you ours.”

Spears hissed quietly. “What are you doing? Taunting them?”

He only smiled.

“*Caernarvon*, *Tianti Shan*. Permission is granted to dock with Chrysalis station and complete your investigation here. You have 48 hours.”

The connection went dead.

Nailed it. Mattis’s grin spread from ear to ear.

“That was a risky move,” said Spears, shaking her head mirthlessly. “How did that even *work*?”

“Even today, it’s difficult to understand the kind of corruption that goes on in China and their galactic colonies,” he said. “Graft, bribery, nepotism, unilateral action, patronage, statistical falsification… you name it, it’s there. The thing is they have this concept… *face*. You want to save face. You want to be seen as a law abiding citizen, a good person, a cooperative person who doesn’t make a fuss. I’m almost positive they don’t have formal jurisdiction over this area and that’s why they were so aggressive—they wanted us to back off without asking any questions.”

Spears nodded thoughtfully. “So you’re saying,” she said, “that this fleet of ships is just like us. Just winging it, trying to solve a puzzle without any real authority to do so.”

“Oh no,” said Mattis, the corner of his mouth turning up. “Not at all. We have Special Agent Blair aboard. She may not be the whole of the FBI, not even the intergalactic branch, but we have something and they have *nothing*. We’re totally legitimate here.”

“That we are,” said Blackwood, also smiling.

“Get her to the hangar bay ASAP,” said Spears, “and make sure she’s briefed. We only have forty-eight hours and I want her boots on that station as soon as we can. What support can we send?”

“Certainly not Marines,” Mattis said. “The locals *hate* the military. They would probably string them up on sight.”

“What if we gave them plain clothes?”

It was tempting, but on short notice, what they could come up with would probably not be very convincing. “You need a certain air to fit in there,” he said. “Military people tend not to have it. A kind of roguish scoundrel look and feel, and it goes beyond what you’re wearing. You basically have to *smell* like a civilian.”

Spears considered. “I brought Lieutenant Corrick along for her knowledge. Is she fit for a trip down to that asteroid?”

“Not yet,” said Blackwood. “I’m sorry, ma’am.”

She clicked her fingers thoughtfully. “Ahh, blast it all. She would have been quite useful.”

Even though it was impossible, the very idea nagged at him. Such a mission would require trust. Trust in her.

Trust in Corrick… after what she’d done.

For some reason, it burrowed into him. Images of Corrick betraying them again flashed into his mind, too sudden and powerful to dismiss. He’d been suppressing his feelings about this for too long. Rage shot through his body, anger so pure and wild it hit him in the small of his back like a hammer. Images—vivid, visceral, powerful image—leapt into his mind unabated, images of Chuck’s mangled arm pinned under the wreckage of the *Stennis*, of the ship’s reactor cores igniting, blasting him to atoms. There wasn’t even a body for him to bury.

And it was *her* fault.

“Damn good thing she’s still sick,” he snarled, surprising himself with how forcefully it came out. “Hopefully she succumbs and we never have to worry about her betraying us *again*. Killing our people *again*.”

Silence fell over the bridge.

“You okay?” asked Spears, quietly. “Admiral?”

He realized his hands were in fists by his sides, his feet shifted into a fighting stance.

Slowly, deliberately, he relaxed. “Sorry. It’s just… it’s just…”

With perfect calm, Spears nodded slowly and deliberately. “Of course,” she said. “Blackwood, arrange the away mission. Regardless of what we might want or not want, Lieutenant Corrick, of course, has no part of it; make sure Blair takes point on this one. I think it’s time for her to finally prove herself to be useful.” Spears gestured to the door to her ready room. “Admiral Mattis, a word? Now, if you please.” Her tone brooked no debate.

With a heavy sigh, Mattis turned and walked toward the ready room.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Captain Spears's ready room
HMS Caernarvon
Kepler-1011 system, near Chrysalis

Mattis stepped into the ready room, folding his hands behind his back. He wasn't entirely accustomed to getting berated by superior officers, especially not the commanding officer of ships, but his court case had given him a taste of what it felt like. Internally, he berated *himself*, his own internal voice far more cutting than whatever Spears would hurl at him.

You idiotic old man. Get it together. This is an important mission and you're fucking it up for everyone. Blackwood nearly got herself frozen into a popsicle and she's holding up much better than you are…

Spears moved to her desk as though to sit, but instead, just rested her hand on the back of her expensive leather chair. "What was that, Jack?" she asked, an uncharacteristic softness in her voice.

"No excuse, Ma'am," said Mattis, formally.

"No excuse, Ma'am." Spears echoed what he said in a quite passable American accent. "Don't give me that. This isn't about the chain of command—I know you better than to think you and I need to be following that right here, right now." She paused for emphasis. "But that, my old friend, is just between you and me. There isn't—*can't be*—any sign that there's weakness in me, or in you, in front of the bridge crew. That kind of thinking spreads like cancer, Jack. And I won't have it on my ship."

"Even if it's true," said Mattis, the admission stinging his pride more than he cared to admit to himself. "I… I'm sorry, Pippa. I shouldn't have said that."

She ran her hand along the back of her chair. "You're damn fucking right you shouldn't have." Hearing the normally calm, reserved Englishwoman swear like that was jarring. "But it's fine. We can airbrush

that out of our memories if you like. This isn't what this is about. I just mean to ask… we haven't talked about Chuck. Not really. Not properly."

It was true. He hadn't spoken to Spears about it, or Elroy about it really, or anyone. He'd kept the grief and the anger and the pain all bottled up deep inside him, had paved over those feelings with other things, and… and now, in an instant, the *thought* of putting Elroy in danger had bought it all back to the surface—even if the poor kid was a thousand light years away sitting on a beach or something.

He knew he had overreacted wildly to Spear's offhand suggestion, but he couldn't help it. Mattis felt just as bad now, as the moment the Rhinos had dragged him into the shuttle…

"When you have a child," said Mattis, softly, "and you lose them, a bit of yourself dies. That's just something that I have to deal with, and I'm dealing with it in the only way I know how: protecting Elroy, and helping my country. That person… that person that I was… *Admiral* Jack Mattis. He died on that ship. All that's left is the remainder. *Captain* Jack Mattis. Lesser. Some…" he struggled for the right word. "*Part* of me has been removed, Pippa. I'm different now. And I don't think I can come back."

Spears smiled, but it was a sad, empty smile. "Well, if it helps, I dealt with it by drinking."

That surprised him, enough that he didn't fully process it the moment he said it. "Sorry?"

"When I lost my first child, I self-medicated with brandy and vodka mixers, hold the mixers. There's a certain mindset about drinking liquor neat; because, well, it tastes like arse, don't you know? Burns the throat on the way down, not a pleasant experience at all. But we do it because of a simple flaw in our biological makeup: we can only feel pain in one part of our bodies at once, so if our throat's on fire, our heart carries on."

"I… didn't realize you and Peter had kids," said Mattis, softly.

"We don't. Four miscarriages, Mattis. And each one of them well over three months. At that point you essentially give birth, did you know that? It's bloody painful, and afterward you have nothing to show for it but your pain—most of which you can't see anyway. So every time, well, I drank away those feelings, and finally, I got too old for all that nonsense so the problems sorted itself out."

"I'm sorry," said Mattis, genuinely. "You never told me…"

“I never told a lot of people. Even Peter thinks I only had two,” she said, sighing and running a hand through her hair. “So, look. I know you’re distracted right now. I know you’re in pain. And I know that pain. I’m not saying it’s easy—or that it’ll get easier—or that any of that trite, fortune-cookie nonsense is true, but what I’m saying is, we have a job to do and I need to know, truthfully, if you can do it or not. Because look. You’ve done your part. You got us the Reardons. You got us to Chrysalis, and bought me the key to getting past the Chinese. You got yourself bloody blown up and my XO along with you. There is absolutely, absolutely no shame in walking away at this point, your head held high, knowing you did your best. I won’t bring up Corrick again outside of business. I promise.” She paused, giving him time to process. “And if it helps, Elroy is safe, too, a long way away from here. And if you want to join him…”

Mattis smiled a little. “The thought never even crossed my mind for an instant. I’m here for the end for this, no matter what.”

Spears smiled in return. “Very well. Let’s get back out there, then, shall we? Clock’s ticking.”

“I’ll put the kettle on,” said Mattis. “Hell, maybe I’ll even have some too.”

Laughing, Spears clapped approvingly. “We’ll make a bloody good Englishman out of you yet, *Admiral* Jack Mattis.”

Admiral…

“Is that a compliment?” He grinned teasingly. “I can’t tell.”

Spears shooed him out the door. “You promised me tea,” she said. “Don’t cock it up.”

“I won’t.”

“And Jack?” Spears’s voice got serious again. “Good talk.”

“Good talk,” he echoed. “I’ll help Blackwood get the away mission ready, go wake up the Reardons, and then I’ve got to call our little pet investigator and see if she’s available to stretch her legs…”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Blair's Quarters
HMS Caernarvon
Caernarvon
Kepler-1011 system

Special Agent Denelle Blair had taken nearly a full day to recover from her bout of space sickness, and she was furious about it.

She had once read Mark Twain's description of seasickness: at first, one would be so sick that they would be afraid they would die, and then they would be so sick they would be afraid they *wouldn't* die.

It wasn't *quite* that bad, but it was bad. Maybe about… eighty percent that bad. She'd taken medication, puked it up, taken more medication, and puked that up, too. Only now, aboard the *Caernarvon*—a much more steady, stable vessel—was she beginning to recover. Even on a starship, with a perfectly functional artificial gravity, something about it still felt… *off*. It wasn't natural, and whatever tiny differences there were between real gravity and fake gravity took time to adjust to.

Humans were meant to live on the ground, safe and secure with earth underneath them and blue skies overhead. Not out in steel boxes floating in the vacuum.

Finally she was feeling better—better enough to worry about all the drama with the alarms and klaxons and whatnot.

"Mattis to Blair," came a voice from her communicator.

Eyeing the device cautiously, she picked it up. "Blair here. What's up, Captain?"

There was something in his tone that suggested she wasn't about to like what he had to say. "We've arrived at Chrysalis and it turns out there's a Chinese blockade in place."

"Oh boy," said Blair. "I'm loving where this is heading."

“It gets worse. We have reason to suspect that a lead to our man, Yim, can be found there—the only problem is getting in. The Chinese don’t want a military presence, so… all we have is you and the Reardons. The two—ahem—enterprising young gentlemen have contacts in the area. But only the two of them and you are going over. No backup. That’s all we have, civilians-wise.”

“Shame we couldn’t bring Corrick on this trip,” said Blair. “She knows the terrain. That would be useful.”

There was a pause. “Corrick’s not coming.”

For a moment she thought there might be something more to that, some other part that she was missing. Her investigator’s urges nagged at her, but she brushed them aside. Mattis wasn’t under the microscope here. “O…kay. I guess it’s just the three of us then. What are the local laws about sidearms? You aren’t thinking of sending us in there with just our fists, are you?”

Mattis laughed down the line, somewhat incredulous. “Wait, you’re a federal agent and you don’t know about Chrysalis?”

“I know you mentioned it during our interview,” she said, somewhat defensively. “And I know you and Spears mentioned it a couple of times. Isn’t that the place where the *Midway* got destroyed?”

“Yes,” said Mattis stiffly.

“Seems like some kind of standard *hive of scum and villainy* type place.”

“Right,” said Mattis. “It’s a bit more than that, though. I mean, I didn’t even mention the minefield yet.”

“Minefield?” Blair stared at the bulkhead. “It’s deactivated, right? The mines are deactivated?”

Mattis said nothing.

“Oh, that’s just *great.*”

“Yeah. My thoughts exactly. Look, it’s a tiny asteroid in the orbit of Kepler-1011. Like most settled ‘roids it has its own culture, and Chrysalis is the kind of place where one can buy *anything*, and the only real law is ‘don’t fuck with people unless you want to be fucked with’. You wanna walk down the street carrying an anti-tank rocket launcher? You go right ahead. There’s not even a local police force there, so…”

“So wait, why do you need me?”

“Because Chrysalis likes existing, and they exist because the governments of the world permit them to exist. They permit them to exist

because, well, there's no labor laws there, and so unscrupulous companies do shady shit there."

"What's this all have to do with me?"

"Well, they have a—a fluid and flexible grasp of what is law and order there. The way it works is they have a thing called the Non-Aggression Principle, or NAP. It's pretty simple: if anyone hurts anyone, everyone kills that person."

"Wonderful."

"But," said Mattis, "they understand that murderers and psychos will flee anywhere where the law can't touch them, and when they arrive in that place, they'll keep up with the murdering of the locals instead. *They* don't want to be murdered, probably very slightly less than they don't want law enforcement sniffing around their business. If they ID you, they won't be happy to see you—not one bit—but if you don't openly identify as a federal agent, and don't hurt anyone, you should be okay. All we need to do is talk to Reardon's contact. Just meet the person, get the information about Yim, if there is any to be had, and get out. Don't arrest anyone, just ignore what you see."

"Yeah," said Blair, somewhat bitterly. "Space is great. I definitely made the right choice in coming out here."

Mattis chuckled. "I know, but you wanna find Yim, don't you?"

"Right." She clenched her jaw. "Okay, well, how are we getting there? I don't think I can handle a shuttle. The *Caernarvon* will dock with the place and transfer us over, right?"

Mattis was silent.

"Right?"

More silence. Then, "I'm afraid it has to be a shuttle."

Blair groaned and ended the call. It was just getting better and better.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Recovery Ward
Infirmary
HMS Caernarvon
Orbit near Chrysalis

Guano woke up with the absolute worst headache she'd ever had in her entire life, period. And one time she had drunk a whole bottle of absinthe just to prove to her flight crew that she could, earning herself a three day stay in the infirmary for alcohol poisoning.

But this. Damn, this was something else. It wasn't just her head. It was *everywhere*. Her every muscle ached, as though her body was protesting its very existence. Not that she could do anything about that, but at least she didn't have tiny robots in her brain anymore.

"Ow."

Wincing in pain, Guano reached over and, very slowly, grabbed hold of the call button. She needed pain meds *yesterday*.

Within seconds, a pair of nurses arrived, and with them, Doctor Manda. "How are you feeling?" she asked, tittering happily. She had obviously been waiting outside.

"I feel like total shit," Guano said truthfully. "My head is killing me. My whole body feels like it got hit by a truck, and then that truck got run over by a much bigger, much heavier truck that crushed the first truck into little tiny pieces, and then all those little pieces got forced into my body. And then they exploded."

"That's normal," said Doctor Manda, smiling. "Sedatives can sometimes feel like a hangover. They're not good, but believe me, the actual pain is much worse."

"I feel pain," said Guano, grimacing. "Definitely pain."

"It's nothing like what you'd be feeling without the medication."

Well, that was reassuring. Burning pain continued to sear around her scalp, like a thousand fire ants were crawling under her skin. “So what now? My head is really killing me, Doc.”

Doctor Manda frowned, taking a clipboard from one of the nurses, scribbling something on it, then handing it back. “I’m upping your dosage a little,” she said. “Just enough to take the edge off.”

“Gimme,” said Guano.

Doctor Manda touched her wrist mounted computer and, almost immediately, Guano felt the drugs flow into her system. Not enough—she still ached all over—but it helped dull the roar.

“Why can’t you just knock me out?” Guano asked, shifting in her bed, trying to get comfortable without moving too much. “Kinda don’t want to be awake for this part.”

“We can’t fully sedate you,” said Doctor Manda. “We need you up and ready to go back in as soon as you’re able.”

“But I thought you got the nanobots out,” she said. “Why do I need to get scanned again?”

Doctor Manda hesitated.

“Is there something you’re not telling me, Doctor?”

“We should focus on getting you rested for now,” she said, carefully. “We can talk later.”

“So I just lay here?” she asked. “And wait until my body miraculously heals itself?”

“Pretty much. Modern medicine is kind of like that. The body still does most of the work.”

Well, if that was the case, modern medicine sucked. “Hmmph.”

“Don’t worry,” said Doctor Manda, making a point to smile reassuringly. “You’ll have plenty to do real soon.”

What exactly did *that* mean? “Pardon?”

“Just try to rest for now. We’ll talk later.”

Guano sighed and tried to pout, but the medication in her veins made her too sleepy. Doctor Manda left, the nurses left, and she closed her eyes, pretending to be asleep.

When the coast was clear, Guano gently slid the plugs out of her, groggily slipped out of bed and stumbled to a cabinet. She rummaged through it, fighting the agony in her head and the wooziness in her step, until finally she found what she needed.

Stims. The same kind of uppers they gave her when she was flying. With them she just might be able to walk around…

She put the needle into her IV, and in seconds, she felt the effects.

It wasn't much, but it would do.

With shaking hands, she pulled out her communicator and scrolled through the apps. She tapped on *Locate Person*, then tapped in a name:

Mattis, Jack (CPT)

The computer instantly drew her a map of the inside of the ship. Now all she had to do was follow the line and hope nobody recognized her… or realize she shouldn't be walking around. Or that her guards didn't show up. Or any number of things that might happen.

Yeah, great plan, idiot…

Chapter Thirty-Six

Shuttle
195km from Chrysalis Station
Kepler-1011 system

Despite dosing herself with as much travel sickness meds as she could stand, Blair felt her stomach heave as the shuttle drifted away from the *Caernarvon* and toward Chrysalis station. It felt like her insides were protesting the shift in gravity by undergoing violent upheaval, threatening with fire and fury to leap out through her nose.

All she had to do was wait, just get through the intolerably disgusting but mercifully short trip, and she would be okay. But the shuttle kept turning and twisting. Why didn't they just fly in a straight line? There was no atmosphere, why did they have to keep dodging? Was the pilot *trying* to make her sick?

"You look like you're about to upchuck, Detective," said Harry Reardon. He had a huge, heavily modified rifle sitting in his lap and was wearing a ridiculous leather jacket and denim jeans. "Make sure you look away when you do, yeah? I am dressed for *success* right now."

"I'm not a Detective. I'm a Special Agent." Blair glared at him, airsickness bag clutched tightly in one hand, ready for use. "You have a license for that longarm?" she asked, doing her absolute best to look as intimidating as she could, despite feeling that, at any moment, her lunch could make a cameo appearance.

"Nope," said Reardon, grinning so wide his stupid mouth looked like a half moon on his face. "No license. And it has an illegal suppressor, and a restricted night-vision scope that I also don't have a license for, and it has souped up extra-hot rounds that I also don't have a license for—and are stolen!—and the rifle's stock is 3-D printed from plans I did *not* pay for." He gave the weapon a soft jiggle. "And it's been used in *criiiiime*. What do you think of that, De-tect-*iiiiiive*?"

He was enjoying himself way too much. Blair honestly had no idea what to do or say, so just kept the airsick bag close to her mouth. “Great. Don’t point it at my face or anything like that. Just—” she hiccuped. “Just tell me you know how to shoot that thing.”

“He does,” said Sammy Reardon, with an edge of despondency. The ship changed course again. “It sucks because he actually is a good shot.” He smiled reassuringly. “If it helps, I have licenses for all *my* hardware.” He patted a matte black pistol in a holster on the side of his wheelchair.

“Good, at least one of you isn’t going to get a stern talking to—” she hiccuped again. The ship swung to the side. “Aww, crap.”

Sammy gave a crooked, nervous smile. “But, uhh, it *is* under a fake name, of course.”

Of course. The shuttle dove, and her stomach felt like it was about to fly out her nose. “Urp…”

Reardon casually pulled back the charging handle, loading the rifle. “Yeah, you’re going to fit in just perfectly here.”

Blair hiccuped again, closing her eyes and trying to steady herself. The shuttle turned, banking toward what she presumed was the hangar bay. Damn it… so close. *Don’t throw up, don’t throw up, don’t think about what might happen if you do—create a beautiful little Bob Ross masterpiece out of puke. But probably more like Jackson Pollack…*

“Hey, open your eyes,” said Sammy. “If you’re getting motion sickness, try to focus on a distant point. It’s caused by your middle ear and your eyes telling your brain different things.”

She forced her eyes open against her better judgement and turned her head to look out one of the small, round portholes. Just in time to see a huge black and spiked space mine drift past, a slowly blinking red light perched on top of it flashing ominously.

“Holy shit—”

“It’s fine,” said Reardon, laughing playfully. “That’s just the mine drifting by to say hello. They’re totally harmless.”

“Gravity mines are *not* harmless,” she said, crumpling the bag in a tight grip. That must be why the pilot was dodging all the time. To try and avoid crashing into them… “That thing could just detonate at any second and—”

“And we’d never feel it, so why worry?”

Blair waited for the devilish thing to just get bored and explode, killing them all, but it didn’t seem to. The shuttle approached a large hangar bay

cut into the asteroid, and they were swallowed like a fly drifting into the mouth of some giant beast.

“It’s good to be back,” said Sammy, grinning. She couldn’t understand it.

“What the hell’s so good about this place?”

Sammy tittered. “Apart from the best damn hot noodle box you will *ever* taste, period? Apart from the great coffee, the super awesome games and VR consoles?”

“And the hottest babes *ever?*” offered Reardon, reaching up and unstrapping himself from his seat. A soft alarm started beeping incessantly.

“Hey,” said Blair, eyes wide. The shuttle was still going. “You can’t get up. We haven’t stopped yet.”

“And that’s the beauty of Chrysalis,” proclaimed Reardon with a wide sweep of his arm. “You can do *whatever* the absolute hell you want—”

The shuttle’s skids touched down, the vibration throwing Reardon off his feet and onto the metal deck.

Sammy laughed hysterically. “You dumb piece of shit,” he said, cackling like a demented hyena.

Reardon laughed too, pushing himself up onto his elbows, blood trickling from his nose. And she still felt like throwing up.

And she still had the hiccups.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Main Street
Chrysalis Station
Kepler-1011 system

With her stomach still tied up in knots, Blair stepped off the shuttle and onto the receiving area of Chrysalis.

The whole place was lit up with gaudy lights and bright, neon advertisements that hawked various wares. Expensive-looking computer screens crammed full of advertising and marketing nonsense covered up grimy air vents and poorly welded bulkheads that, she reasoned, could give way at any moment.

And there were *so many people*.

"Home sweet home," said Reardon, stepping forward and taking in a huge, deep breath of the air, exhaling it slowly like a man breathing his first breath in a long time.

"This isn't home," said Sammy, wheeling down the ramp behind them. "This is a vacation destination."

Reardon grabbed Sammy's head, noogying it playfully. "That it is, little brother. Our home is the Aerostar and the stars between which she sails."

"I hope," said Blair, running her finger disdainfully along a grime-covered air vent, "that your Aerostar is cleaner than this place." Hiccup.

"She's a dirty girl," said Reardon proudly. "And just like this place, she is strong and full of character."

"Sounds like she needs a good vacuuming. Just like this place."

They moved out onto the crowded street proper. Walking in Chrysalis was like swimming through a sea of people. Standing room only. Sammy's wheelchair took up a lot of room. Blair shook her head and walked farther down the main street. "So," she said, "where's our contact again?"

Reardon pushed through the crowd to catch up, with Sammy scooting up along behind him, using the hole he made. "*Blessed Humanity* coffee

shop," he said. "It's just off the main drag. Look for a neon sign of a steaming cup of coffee."

She did so, keeping her eyes up, searching for a single neon sign in a field of neon signs. They walked past a store selling "genuine" copies of Chinese and US military hardware, a brothel teeming with heavily made up women and men, and some kind of store selling drugs that could, it claimed, send you "into orbit".

What a place.

"What a place," said Reardon, striding behind her with his hands in his pockets, beaming like a kid in a candy store, seemingly oblivious to the crushing current of people all around them. "This is so great."

Curiously, almost everything had a logo on it, sometimes hidden below scratch marks or dust. US corporations. Chinese corporations. Indian corporations. Everything here was made by some company, it seemed. "It's interesting," Blair said, "that the only reason this libertarian's paradise even exists is because of the actions of a highly authoritarian intergalactic government."

"You said it," said Sammy, steering his wheelchair awkwardly around a rusted hole in the deck plating, nearly bumping into someone. Obviously a local.

The person was wearing the upper half of a salvaged Rhino armored space suit, covered in dents and scorch marks, and the lower half of a homemade EVA suit. A huge mini-gun was strapped to their back. "Hey," they said, clearly masculine but otherwise unidentifiable under the helmet. "Running over my foot with that thing counts as laying hands on me. That's a NAP violation if you proceed."

Sammy snorted derisively. "Like a wheel counts, jackoff."

"Any unwanted physical contact is a NAP violation."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Sammy wheeled around the person and moved through the crowd."

"Sorry," she said, moving past the person and following Sammy. "How far is it?"

"Not far," said Sammy.

And then, emerging from the neon-lit haze, she spotted it. A steaming mug of coffee, flickering slightly. A bullet hole had embedded itself in the side of the plastic backing, barely missing the neon tubes. "There!"

“Nice work, Detective,” said Reardon, stepping out in front of her. “C’mon. I’ll get you a Hazelnut Fizzle. It’s like a thousand black holes crunched a universe full of deliciousness into a single particle, then made a drink out of those particles.”

“I was thinking more an Irish whisky,” she said, grimacing slightly and hiccuping again. “And don’t call me Detective in public, especially because I’m a Special Agent. But don’t call me *that* in public either.” A pause. “C’mon. A Hazelnut Fizzle?”

“That’s a very manly drink,” protested Reardon, turning around and walking backward toward the shop, seemingly just *hoping* that people would make way for him. Which, to his credit, they appeared to. “It’s super manly. And about thirty percent alcohol.”

“It’s *pink*,” said Sammy, groaning softly as he caught up to Blair, looking up to her with a tired look on his face. “Just ignore him, okay? I learned to.”

Would it be possible to just mentally airbrush the guy out of her life?

Reardon pushed open the door ahead of them and strode in like he was some kind of demented peacock who had just become part owner of the place. Blair stepped in behind him, keeping her head low and avoiding eye contact. She held the door open for Sammy. It was good to be away from the crowd.

The smell of freshly roasted coffee drifted out toward her, making her stomach rumble. She’d been nauseated all morning, and only now had realized how long it had been since she’d eaten. And coffee… how she loved coffee.

“Ladies, ladies, ladies,” said Reardon, gliding open-armed to two finely dressed women in the corner. They were wearing clothes that seemed to be entirely holographic, merely projections of light that rearranged themselves as they moved, flashing prices in various currencies. Both smiled demurely as he approached. “Guess who’s home and needing some *love?*”

What the hell. “Aren’t we here to meet a contact?” Blair hissed to Sammy.

Sammy groaned. “Sorry,” he said, grimacing “He’s been… on the ship for a while.”

“Time for some *me time*,” said Reardon, sliding into the spare seat between the women and draping his arms around both. He raised his voice high enough for everyone in the place to hear. “I’ll be back later,

Detective.” Then, realizing too late what he’d said, Reardon’s eyes went wide.

Shit.

Oh shit. Suddenly the music stopped. Every conversation stopped. All the eyes in the bar were on her. *Detective.*…

She hiccuped.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Blessed Humanity Coffee Shop
Chrysalis Station
Kepler-1011 system

The word rang in Blair's ears like a gong. *Detective*…

"Yeah," said Sammy, reaching up to clap her on the back. "You still got hiccups, Detective?" He glanced to the bartender, an older man with greying temples. "That's just her name. Weird parents. Hippies."

She smiled awkwardly. "Y-yeah. That's me, Detective… that's my name." She racked her brain for one of the old cop jokes she'd heard a million times. "Because my last name is Apple."

The bartender scowled, casually sliding one hand below the bar, to grasp something she couldn't see. "Detective Apple? I don't get it."

Blair smiled. "Undercover *crops*. My folks, they… ahem. Smoked a lot of weed."

"A whole lot," said Sammy. "Like, so much."

A tense silence, broken only by one of Reardon's prostitutes giggling in the background.

"Easy, Armitage," said Sammy, warmly. "C'mon. You know the Reardons. We wouldn't bring a freaking *cop* into your shop, would we?"

Armitage, obviously undecided, scowled a little. "I don't know. Would you?"

Sammy jerked his thumb toward Reardon, who was sitting in the corner, back to obliviously fawning over the two girls. Each one of them had two empty glasses in front of them that had been holding some kind of pink liquid. Reardon had four. How had he drunk them so fast? Where had they even *come from?* "Look, if she *was* a cop, do you think Reardon would be stupid enough to announce it to the entire establishment?"

"Fair enough," the bartender said, relaxing slightly, offering her a little smile. "So your name is really Detective, huh?"

“Yeah.” Blair had been undercover exactly once before, but it had taught her a lot. She knew how to bluff fast enough to stay on her toes. “Look, my name is a literal joke. It’s fine. I don’t like it any more than you do, but why should I change it? It’s *mine*. It’s everyone else who has the problem with it.”

“Nice,” said Armitage, nodding approvingly. “Everyone gets some kind of shitty card dealt to them in life. Glad to see you rolling with yours, Miss Apple.”

She nodded. “Sammy, watch the door.”

“On it,” he said, wheeling away.

Blair slid into a stool, grunting softly. “Yeah. Anyway. Gimme some of that pink shit,” she said. “We’re here to meet someone about a missing person.”

“Well, if you want to get straight down to business, we can do that.” Armitage took out a thick mug and poured coffee from a depressingly stained pot. How many months it had gone uncleaned would be a mystery for the ages, but it probably wouldn’t kill her. “Fortunately I got a… *missing persons* guy. Great guy. Name’s Christopher. Hang on.” He turned and called over his shoulder. “Chris, they’re here.”

From a door behind the bar, a man emerged wearing a thick coat, surgical mask, and a hat. Interesting fashion choices for the muggy bar interior. He slid up to the counter keeping his head down low, letting his hat hide whatever part of his face might have been visible from behind the mask. He had a thick chrome briefcase handcuffed to his wrist. “You the curious people with a request for me, right?” He clicked his tongue softly. He spoke in a whisper, ostensibly to mask a strange accent she couldn’t quite place. “I have resources and means at my disposal. I might be able to help you—for a price.”

“That’s us,” said Blair. Smiling as best she could. “I’m looking for a man.”

Chris turned his head toward Reardon and his cohorts. “We have men if you want them.”

Cute. “That isn’t what I meant,” she said.

Armitage slid the coffee over to her. It was bright pink and smelled like acid and sugar.

“Okay,” said Chris, adjusting the handcuffs on his briefcase. It looked uncomfortable. “What then?”

“I’m looking for a *specific* man,” she said, cupping the mug in both hands. “A missing person.”

“Plenty of people go missing on Chrysalis,” said Chris, looking back toward the bar, the wide brim of his hat casting a deep shadow across his face. “My price is steep.”

“What do you need?” asked Blair. “I can pay.”

Chris considered. “Who do you work for?”

She jerked her thumb toward Harry Reardon, who seemed engrossed in slipping dollar bills into one of the women’s tops.

Chris leaned forward and whispered urgently: “And you aren’t working with the Chinese?”

“No.” She was firm.

“Very well, then we can talk. First things first—Who is this man you’re looking for?”

She raised the foul-smelling drink to her lips and sipped. The moment the stuff touched her mouth, a burning, painful sensation spread to her lips and was suddenly replaced with a taste as sweet as a spoonful of honey. It was like eating a block of molten sugar. “Admiral Yim of the People’s Republic of China Army Navy.”

Chris hesitated, scrutinizing her from under the bridge of his hat. Then he slowly reached up and pulled it off. Chris was Admiral Yim.

“Awkward,” he said.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Blessed Humanity Coffee Shop
Chrysalis Station
Kepler-1011 system

"Awkward," echoed Blair, her eyes widening.

Nothing was said for a moment. Then, Admiral Yim reached up and adjusted his collar. "So, do I get paid now?"

She stared at him in bewilderment. "Is… is that really you?"

"It is," said Admiral Yim, cautiously removing his surgical mask and tucking it into the hat. "Are you with the Chinese government?"

Blair felt a twinge of anger threatening to disrupt her cool. She fought it down as best she could. "Don't you think," she asked, her tone ever-so-slightly icy, "that you should be asking if we're with the *Americans?* Not the Chinese?"

Yim, confused, shook his head. "Why would the Americans want me, other than to turn me over to the Chinese military?"

Now it was Blair's turn to be confused. She leaned closer, dropping her voice to a whisper. "Are you shitting me?" she hissed. "You shot the President of the United States."

Yim stared open mouthed. "What?"

Fumbling, Blair snatched up her tablet off from her hip, loaded the security camera footage, and then showed him the picture. The picture of him shooting President Schuyler.

"That isn't me," said Yim, shaking his head in disbelief. "I-I know it *looks* like me, but that is *not* me."

"Then who was it?" demanded Blair.

Yim shrugged helplessly. "*Kào bèi*, how should I know? I've been hiding out on this blasted rock trying to make ends meet by selling information. Ever since my government tried to have me arrested."

"Arrested for what?" she demanded. "Yim, what did you do?"

“Nothing!” he hissed, loud enough to draw a few curious stares from the nearby patrons. After offering an apologetic wave, Yim dropped his voice back down. “I didn’t do anything, I swear on my mother’s grave.”

It would be difficult to get anything out of him unless she could get his trust. “I’m with Captain Jack Mattis,” she said. “He’s waiting for us on our ship.”

His eyes widened. “Mattis is here?”

“Yes, and I’ll take you to him…” she leaned forward a little bit. “But I need to know what happened first.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Yim grimaced. “Really, nothing. I was just on leave while my ship was being retrofitted with various new systems, and then suddenly armed guards were at my door. I didn’t know what they wanted, and I knew too much from hanging around with that *hún dàn*, Admiral Mattis. So I bolted. Found work in the less-than-reputable places in the galaxy. And now here I am, peddling information and contacts in a bar. A bar I once visited with Mattis.”

“You were a good customer,” said Armitage, smiling fondly. “As much as you were a good employee.”

“I hated it. And your coffee is terrible.”

“Aww,” said Armitage affectionately. “I guess that means you’ll be finalizing your tab, then? It’s quite sizable.”

Yim looked distinctly uncomfortable, eyes flicking away. “Uhh…”

Blair coughed into her hand. “Hello, still here. Still wanting answers.”

Yim leaned his elbow on the counter, closing his eyes a moment. “I honestly don’t know what to tell you,” he said. “I didn’t shoot the President. I didn’t even know she was dead. This is the first I’ve heard about it… we don’t exactly get much news on this rock. People who come here are looking for peace and quiet, to not be found. That’s all I wanted.”

“Hate to spoil your vacation, but there’s a fleet of Chinese ships directly above this rock.”

Yim’s eyes shot open. “What ships?” He looked around wildly as if the ships might be there in the bar. “Wait—Armitage, what ships?”

Armitage casually polished a glass. For a moment he said nothing. Then, finally, he set it down and flicked his cloth over his shoulder. “Sorry, Yim,” he said, a look of genuine pity on his face. “They offered me too much. Sorry you had to find out this way.”

Yim spat on the ground. “Damn this place. And you too, you snake.”

“Sorry,” said Armitage, shrugging. “They’ll be here any moment. You had best get going.”

Blair ground her teeth, then pushed herself off her stool. “Reardon, Sammy, get your shit! We are leaving!”

“But I haven’t even started yet,” complained Reardon, his face smushed into the chest of one of the prostitutes.

“Now!” shouted Blair, grabbing him by the collar and yanking him up to his feet. “Out! Back to the ship!”

Reardon awkwardly stared at her. “What?”

Yim coughed. “Take me with you,” he pled. “Take me to Mattis.”

“Fine. Now let’s go!”

Reardon staggering forward, unslinging his rifle. He’d obviously had *way* too much to drink in way too short a time, but there was no time to do anything about it.

Blair drew her gun and marched to the door, kicking it open.

A bullet whizzed past her head and smashed into the door frame, missing her by inches.

Down the road, five uniformed Chinese Marines trained rifles directly on her as they pushed through the crowd on the street, which shouted and pushed back.

Only a second to decide—run, or submit?

She turned her head toward the three men inside. Practically helpless. Sure to slow her down. She took a huge gulp of air and shouted at the top of her lungs.

“Run!”

Chapter Forty

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
Space, near Chrysalis

Mattis was always nervous during these kinds of away missions, watching the various screens, unable to help directly. What was going on over there? Were people in danger? Had they found the contact they were searching for?

He idly fiddled with his communicator, and as he did so, it chirped at him. For a second he thought he might have accidentally bumped something, but the device was signaling an incoming long-distance call.

"You can take it," said Spears, staring intently at her command monitor. "I can handle everything from here."

He thanked her and stepped to the back of the bridge, glancing at the device. An incoming call from Elroy. He flicked it open. "This isn't a good time," he said, keeping his voice low. "Is everything okay?" A thought flashed into his head. "This isn't about Jack, is it?"

"No," said Elroy. "Well, yes, but not like that. I just wanted to thank you for… for letting me go back to Jack and go on this trip. We're having a great time."

Mattis stared at a bulkhead. "The money is not going to be there forever," he said. "But it's… important to me that you're doing well. With Chuck gone, you and Jack are all I have left."

"I know, but… but I just wanted to stay with you. To help you. But I think you're okay now. You don't need me."

It was heartening to know Elroy cared about him, but with an operation in progress, Mattis couldn't spare the attention needed to think about it. "We'll talk later," he said. "I promise."

"Okay," said Elroy, and ended the call.

Mattis felt a vague, empty feeling in his gut, as though he had just promised something he had absolutely no way of delivering, but for now, he refocused his mind on the job at hand. The away mission. “Sorry,” he said to Spears, stepping back to his position beside her.

“I said you could take it.” Spears smiled. “He’s a good man.”

“Thank you, Ma’am. My son had good taste.”

“Like father, like son.” Spears turned back to her monitor. “It’s quiet,” she said, considering, her lips pursed. “Nothing from the away team yet. No beacons, nothing.”

He couldn’t help but agree.

Too quiet…

Chapter Forty-One

Outside the Blessed Humanity Coffee Shop
Chrysalis Station
Kepler-1011 system

Blair ducked into the crowded street as another gunshot rang out. Where it landed, she had no idea and no time to check. She kept her head low, pushing and shoving. Yim was immediately behind, a huge revolver cradled in both hands. Staggering and stumbling after him came Reardon with Sammy not far behind, his chair squeaking as it ran over the metal deckplates.

Oh shit… the wheelchair. That was going to be a problem. She plowed ahead in front of the two brothers, shouldering people out of the way. "Move! Move!"

"Hey, screw you, lady!" A guy pulled out his pistol. "You laid hands on me, that's a violation of the NAP!"

Oh crap. That Non-Aggression thing. Blair gave him the finger and kept running, ducking her head low so as to spoil the guy's aim. Behind her, the man touched a yellow and black striped button on his wrist.

Immediately, yellow and black lights flashed in the main street, and a spotlight clicked on from above, bathing the three of them in a bright yellow beam like some kind of giant finger from the roof.

"NAP violation," droned a mechanical voice. "NAP violation."

"Shit," shouted Sammy, his hands waggling a control stick on his chair furiously. The machine hummed as some powerful internal power source engaged. "We gotta get outta here!"

No kidding. With the Chinese Marines hot on their heels, pushing through the crowd was difficult. But if there was anything the Chrysalis citizens hated more than NAP violators, Blair realized, it was probably foreign Marines firing off rounds in their streets. Almost every single person suddenly produced a weapon, pointing them toward the Marines,

yelling and pressing the striped buttons on their wrists. Suddenly the Chinese, too, had a yellow spotlight on them.

The knife cut both ways. Blair was more than happy to exploit the chaos of the situation, keeping her head down low and slinking away into the crowd as best she could, moving back toward the hangar bay. A few people pointed their weapons at her, but she did her best to ignore them. Though she expected to be shot at any moment, nobody fired. Maybe they were just trying to protect themselves more than actively punish her.

"Wait!" cried Sammy from the rear. He was getting swallowed by the crowd, his desperate face disappearing in a sea of people.

"Hold on, Sammy!" Reardon skidded to a drunken stop and whipped around. "I'm coming!"

Aww shit. Double triple shit. Blair stopped too, turning about, weapon raised.

"Leave him," said Yim. "We need to get out of here."

Blair ground her teeth. "I'm not going to leave a kid in a wheelchair behind."

"Fine," said Yim, wheezing faintly. "Stay here." He moved away from her, shoving through the crowd.

Staying there was easier said than done. Blair needed to stall. She could see the Marines' helmets as they pushed and shoving their way ahead. Carefully, Blair lined up her pistol on the top of one. A really difficult shot, but…

Gently—gently she squeezed the trigger, and her pistol roared. The round skipped off the top of the helmet, ricocheting and slamming into a digital screen, destroying it in a shower of sparks and glass.

The Marines all ducked. So did much of the crowd. But at least they stopped moving.

"NAP violation," said the computer again. "NAP violation."

Yeah, that doesn't sound good at all…

"Hey lady," said an older woman nearby, swaddled in thick cloth covering her body like a mummy, a heavy rocket launcher cradled casually in her arms. "You better put your piece down now, before there's any more trouble."

"Dammit, I don't have time for this." Blair fished out her badge. "I'm Special Agent Denelle Blair, San Diego field office, and I—" she hiccuped.

“Dammit! And I’m investigating the assassination of the President of the United States. Stay out of this, Ma’am.”

The woman just raised an eyebrow and, ever so gently, clicked the safety on the launcher. “Not too fond of federal investigators around here,” she said. “And you’re a long way away from San Diego.”

“Blow it out your ass.” Blair scanned over the crowd of people, looking for more Marine helmets. They’d vanished. Yim too. Where…

The lady snorted dismissively, but kept her rocket launcher lowered. Deep down, she must have understood that blowing a federal agent into hunks of meat on the street was likely to result in more problems down the road.

Blair hoped that was the case, at least.

Then, from out of the throng came Reardon, running with Sammy triumphantly riding on his back, hands tight around his brother’s neck. “We’re here!”

Leaving the chair was probably the best bet. “C’mon,” she said, grabbing Reardon’s hand and dragging him forward. “We gotta move.”

Yim caught up, Reardon’s rifle slung in front of him. “This way,” he said, pushing to the front and then turning down a side passage. “I know a shortcut. It’ll get us away from the searchlight.”

“Then lead on,” said Blair, stepping aside to let Reardon and Sammy go ahead of her. “I’ll cover the rear.”

Yim led them to a narrow alleyway between two hastily thrown together prefabricated structures. He squeezed in first, rifle raised, and Reardon and Sammy followed with only a slight stumble. Blair backed in, her back up against Sammy’s, and wiggled through the claustrophobic passage.

“I’m so sorry,” said Sammy. “I tried to keep up, I tried—”

“No worries,” said Blair, keeping her pistol ready. “Just focus on getting out of here. .”

“Okay,” said Sammy, seemingly not convinced. “Damn. I was… I was trying so hard.”

“Later,” Blair insisted. There really was no time for this at all. The farther they got from the main street, the more she relaxed, but then a Chinese Marine ran past the end of the tiny passage. And another, and another.

“Hurry,” she hissed. The fourth Marine, rifle raised, moved past. Okay, only one more…

The last one seemed more cautious than the rest, and when he turned to look down the passageway, their eyes met.

For a very brief moment, Blair just *knew* he was going to turn and shout out for the others. She lined up her gun to the man's chest and fired.

The gunshot seemed extra loud in the dark, cramped alleyway, paining her ears and leaving a profound ringing in them. The round sparked as it skipped off his armor, bouncing up to his helmet and knocking it off. He stumbled back, then slumped to the side, bleeding from the nose.

That was bad. That was real bad. Shooting a Chinese Marine…

For a terrible moment she thought he might be dead, but he was still breathing. Still, it wasn't good.

She ran forward to the opening of the passageway. The other four Marines were moving away, defeated by the din of the NAP sirens, seemingly oblivious to their comrade's fate. Their comrade who desperately needed medical attention.

Two years of Chinese in high school, don't fail me now! Taking a deep breath, she shouted. "*Jūnyī!*" *Medic*.

One of the Marines turned around, saw his fallen comrade, saw her.

She pointed to the fallen Marine, then turned on her heel and ran, hoping it was enough.

She wasn't ready to kill just yet.

Chapter Forty-Two

Dark Alleyway near Receiving Area
Chrysalis Station
Kepler-1011 system

Blair left the shouting of the Marines and the bustle of the crowd behind her, jogging to catch back up to Sammy and the others. Yim led them deeper into the rat maze of narrow tunnels and alleyways between structures. Things got a bit quieter.

"What the hell were you doing?" asked Reardon over his shoulder, panting almost as much as Yim.

"That Chinese soldier was hit," she said. "I shot him. He needed medical attention."

"Yeah, but now they know where we've gone. You goddamn idiot."

She said nothing. She had to at least try and save the guy. She was a sworn federal agent… she wasn't going to start an international incident over a gun battle in the street in an area she had extremely fuzzy jurisdiction over. Fuzzy as in *zero*.

"This way," called Yim ahead. "The hangar bay is just here." With a scrape, he pried a panel off the wall and ducked inside. Reardon went next, nearly gonging Sammy's head on the lip of it, and then she followed.

Sure enough, on the other side of the panel was the receiving area. They attracted some stares as the troupe climbed out of the wall, but Reardon brushed them off. "NAP violation," he said casually, as though that explained everything.

Their shuttle was waiting. "Oh, thank God."

Reardon seemed amused by her relief. "Come on," he said. "Let's get aboard, decompress this hangar bay, and get back to the *Caernarvon* before those Marines report in."

"Good idea." Yim led the way toward the shuttle, rifle scanning the hangar bay as he went.

Out of nowhere, the four uninjured Marines burst through the front door, rifles ready.

“Shit!” Blair dove behind a pile of barrels. Yim stopped, backed up carefully, and ducked behind them next to her. Reardon flopped down beside them, Sammy still dangling from his neck.

Rounds screamed overhead, bouncing off the barrels and ricocheting around the hangar bay, one or two sparking off the hull of the shuttle.

“What’s going on down there?” shouted their pilot.

“We’re about to get pinned down, that’s what!” Blair fired her pistol over the rim of the barrel, hammering the trigger. She had to scatter the Marines so she could buy everyone some time. “Get aboard! Now! Yim, go!”

Yim sprinted up the loading ramp, puffing and wheezing, then crouched by the lip and prepared to cover them.

Blair fired a few more times. The Marines were probably too disciplined to be suppressed by a handgun for too long, but she had to try. “Reardon, go! Yim! Covering fire!”

Reardon broke cover and sprinted toward the shuttle impressively fast considering his state of inebriation and the bulky burden bouncing on his back.

No sounds of covering fire reached Blair’s ringing ears.

“I’m jammed!” shouted Yim, hammering the rifle. “Blast, it’s jammed!”

Double triple shit. The Chinese opened up and gunfire screamed all around them, bullets whizzing like angry hornets past Reardon and Sammy. Blair emptied her magazine, firing wildly without hitting anything.

Miraculously, Sammy and Reardon made it up the ramp. That left only her.

She ejected her magazine, jamming in a fresh one, then clicked the slide closed. Deep breath, deep breath.

“Unjammed!” shouted Yim. He fired a few shots to test it. “Go!”

“Moving!” Blair broke cover, holding her pistol out with one hand, firing wildly as she ran to the loading ramp. The Chinese were relentless as they returned fire. Bullets screamed past her damaged ears. One tore a hole in her shirt. Another bit a chunk out of the heel of her boot, nearly sending her sprawling. She shot. She ran.

And then she was up the loading ramp and collapsed inside the shuttle, panting and gasping. “Pilot! Take off!”

“Requesting decompression of the hangar bay,” said their pilot. Outside the ship she could hear the muted *ping* of rounds bouncing off the hull as the Chinese shot at them. “Stand by. We have to wait until these people clear out… fortunately they’re all rabbiting. They know what’s about to happen.”

Dammit. She didn’t know anything about spaceships. Blair dragged herself up to her feet, unable to suppress a giddy giggle. “Everyone okay? Nobody’s hit?”

“I’m good,” said Yim.

“Yeah,” said Sammy, who was slumped against the wall, exhausted.

“Fine,” said Reardon, laying on the deck looking dangerously close to vomiting. Running for his life with a stomach full of pink coffee apparently didn’t agree with him. It was vaguely satisfying for Blair to see him looking green around the gills for once, and she could barely repress a faint smile. Even her hiccups were gone.

“Wait,” said Reardon, holding up his hand, slick with blood. “*Someone’s* bleeding.”

“I’m clear,” said Yim, turning around. “See?”

Sammy stared at her. “Well, it’s not me,” he said, crawling over to his brother, his thin, limp legs dragging behind him. “You’re drunk, you probably don’t feel it.”

“Or,” said Blair, her eyes drawn to Sammy’s limp legs, to the bloody trail they left. “*You* don’t feel it.”

“Oh,” said Sammy, twisting around and regarding the massive hole in his right thigh with a detached, academic curiosity. “That’s not good.”

Chapter Forty-Three

Shuttle
Hangar Bay
Chrysalis Station
Kepler-1011 system

Blair grabbed a medpack and ripped it open, spilling medical supplies all over the shuttle's deck.

"That's *definitely* not good," said Sammy, again. He didn't seem panicked. Shock must be different when you're paralyzed…

"Damn fucking right that's not good!" Reardon shouted, apparently completely sober now, grabbing his brother by the shoulder. "You dumb shit! You fucking idiot!"

Sammy glared at him, throwing up his hands. "Hey, what did *I* do?"

"You got yourself shot, you dumbass!"

Blair grabbed a bandage compress and saturated it with a hissing can of biofoam, then turned over Sammy's leg, looking for the exit wound. Almost immediately, a spurt of blood shot up like a leak from a hose.

"Oh shit, what was that?" Sammy shrieked and grabbed his thigh, as though suddenly realizing the severity of a gunshot wound. "Oh god! What?"

His femoral artery had been nicked. No other part of the leg would create such blood pressure. "You're in trouble," Blair said, and jammed the bandage-compress against the exit wound. The entry wound continued to spray blood. She could feel it throb under her hand. "I need another compress," she said, snapping her fingers in the air. "Come on, someone!"

Reardon, who was now cradling his brother's head in his lap as he whispered a hurried stream of reassurances stitched together with threats and expletives, paused only long enough to smack Admiral Yim in the kneecap. Yim jumped slightly, then bent over and apologetically tore open another medkit. When he had finished preparing the second bandage, Blair

showed him how to hold Sammy's leg in a bandage-sandwich. The biofoam hissed as it went to work creating a synthetic skin over the wound, stemming the blood.

But a dark brown stain slowly spread over the metal deck. Sammy's whole face went ashen, and he slumped unconscious in his brother's lap.

Reardon and Blair cursed simultaneously. They weren't moving. "Pilot." She squeezed her communicator so hard she thought it might break. "Medical emergency, one of our team is hit. We've gotta get back to the *Caernarvon*. Now."

"Can't," he said, simply.

"What do you mean *can't?*"

"The station won't unlock the hangar bay doors," he said. "They say there's some kind of NAP violation and that we can't leave. That, and there are still those Marines plinking away at the hull. I hope they don't have anything stronger than those rifles, lady, because this is a transport, not a gunship. I don't wanna test the integrity of the hull."

Surely the ship was hardened against micrometeor strikes. Surely it would be okay…

Didn't matter. No time. "Okay, well, you're telling me there's no guns aboard? We can't blast our way out?"

"What part of *transport* don't you understand?"

Yim shot her a concerned frown. "We've gotta get him to a hospital," he said, adjusting his grip on the compress. "Soon."

Blair let out roar of exasperation and squeezed her communicator awkwardly with one hand as she applied more pressure to Sammy with the other. "Blair to *Caernarvon*." No response. Nothing but static. "Blair to *Caernarvon*, respond. Medical emergency on the shuttle." More nothing. "*Dammit*."

"The Chinese are likely jamming us," said Yim. "That's standard procedure on a ground operation."

"There's gotta be a way!" shouted Reardon, his eyes red and glistening. "C'mon. Think. How can we get in contact with Mattis?"

Yim hesitated, then nodded to himself. "Okay, well, in order to maintain communications with the ground teams, there's a free, unjammed frequency. Of course, they rotate it to keep it secret, but it's there."

"Great!" Reardon leaned forward. "Can we use that?"

“It changes randomly,” said Yim, shaking his head vigorously. “We can’t just tune into it. Every one hundred milliseconds the frequency hops. No way we’d be able to get out more than a quick burst.”

“I don’t feel so good,” said Sammy, blinking weakly as he came to.

“I know, Sammy, I know. Just hang tight.” Blair wracked her brains. “But if the Chinese are jamming, then surely the *Caernarvon* would know about it, yeah? Like, jamming usually involves just broadcasting lots of noise—a big, high energy signal from the ship that overwhelms local transmissions. So they know something’s afoot.”

“This is silent jamming,” said Yim bitterly. “Their computers analyze transmissions that come out and intercept them, transmitting the signal wave’s inverse so it gets cancelled out. Like noise cancelling headphones, but on a *massive* scale.”

Damn. She was just an investigator, not a military specialist. She could feel Sammy’s warm blood soaking through the bandage, the pressure defeating the biofoam’s ability to make a tight seal. The kid was in a lot of trouble. “What if…”

“What if you just,” said Sammy, weakly, “send out a big pulse on *every* frequency? Almost all of them will get squelched, of course, but… not on the frequency that is left open.”

“That’ll just piss off the Chinese, won’t it?” Reardon said.

“Yeah,” said Sammy, gasping slightly. “But the… the *Caernarvon* will hear it too. They might assume something’s gone wrong and send help.”

Blair looked at Reardon. “Get to the cockpit. Talk to the pilot. Can you make that happen?”

“Yeah. I think so.” Reardon wiped his eyes and nodded emphatically. “Just to be clear: as loud as possible? All frequencies, right?”

Sammy could only nod.

“I’m on it,” said Reardon, gingerly lowering Sammy’s head and leaping over him toward the cockpit. He shouted over his shoulder, “As fast as I can!”

“You better,” said Blair. “Or your brother is going to die.”

Chapter Forty-Four

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
Space, near Chrysalis

Mattis stared intently at the slowly spinning asteroid, idly tapping his foot, lost in his thoughts.

The last time he had seen this place, the *Midway* had burned up like a firework in its orbit, bought down by the same man who would later kill his son. Mattis had been betrayed here, and a piece of him had been cut out and left to bleed in the void of space.

Even he admitted that the only thing keeping him alive was duty. Duty to the oath he had sworn to protect the United States and her colonies, a duty to protect the innocent people of Earth from a menace very few of them truly understood, a duty to…

To humanity. To his very species.

"Haven't heard anything from them yet, Ma'am," said Blackwood, with the slightest edge of detectible worry. An away team was supposed to regularly check in, but so far they had heard nothing. In fact, sensors all over the ship had gone silent, but Spears had ordered a diagnostic and found nothing wrong. Mattis suspected that the Chrysalis inhabitants, paranoid as they were, had decided to shut everything down.

Either way, he would not be satisfied until the away team returned with a lead on how to locate Yim. He had a lot to say to his old enemy-turned-comrade.

Spears leaned forward in her chair, her discomfort obvious. "It's been too long and it's too quiet," she said.

"Agreed, Ma'am," said Mattis. "It's possible their radios went out, but at the same time *everything* else goes out?" He couldn't believe that this was a coincidence. "It just smells off."

“It smells off,” echoed Spears, giving a slow, vague nod. “Exactly my thoughts, Admiral. You are squared away. I trust your instincts.”

“And I yours,” he said.

Spears debated in silence for a moment, then tapped her fingers on the armrests of her chair. “Open all channels,” she said. “And put them *all* through to the bridge.”

Mattis raised his eyebrows. “All of them? It’ll just sound like… noise.”

“It *should* sound like noise,” said Spears. “But technology has marched on in the few months you’ve been out of the game, Mattis.” She pointed a hand to a monitor that showed the Chinese fleet, floating ominously in space. “We might be witnessing silent jamming. Fortunately, the Royal Navy has a countermeasure, which is to listen on every frequency at once.”

He nodded. The march of progress was always bound to leave tired old men in the dust. “Very well, Ma’am. Let’s do it. We should turn off noise and volume filtering, and use our analog radios, just to make sure we can pick up the weakest signals.”

“Agreed,” said Spears, turning to Blackwood. “Do it.”

Blackwood repeated her order, and with a few taps of her wrist-mounted computer, a faint crackle filled the bridge. It was so soft that it was almost imperceptible.

“Increase volume four hundred percent,” said Spears.

The crackle became a murmur. Voices—human voices—mixed in with occasional beeps and static. It was *everything*. Every network signal, every broadcasted voice, all overlapped and interwoven, forming a flat, eerie murmur.

“Increase volume a further *eight* hundred percent,” said Spears. “Try to filter out the distortion.”

The volume picked up. Despite the racket, Mattis swore he could pick out individual snatches of conversation in the communications. Shouts of confusion, anger, frustration.

… the hell is wrong with the radios?

… need you to get down to deck J and check…

… stupid thing is on the fritz again …

Mattis strained his ears, trying to pick out more. Trying to find a familiar voice, or some snippet of information that—

And then a familiar voice did come in. thundering so loud and raw that it shook his chest. *“HEY!”* Everyone clapped their hands over their ears.

“THIS IS HARRY REAR—”

And then it cut out.

“Did you mute it?” asked Blackwood, her eyes snapping onto the communications officer.

“What?” he asked, blinking in surprise. “Say again?”

Spears grimaced, rubbing her ears tenderly. “I think it just cut out,” she said, glancing at her instruments. “What the devil?”

Blackwood tapped with one hand on her wrist, the other on her left ear. “Unclear, Captain. But I think we can conclude something strange is going on on that asteroid.”

“Something very strange,” said Spears, her voice slightly louder than usual. Everyone’s was. “Okay. We need to get our people out of there. Blackwood, can you trace where that… *extremely* loud transmission came from?”

“Analyzing,” said Blackwood, glancing at her console. “It looks like it originated from the hangar bay. It’s currently closed and pressurized, Ma’am.”

Well, now, that complicated things. “They might be trapped in there,” Mattis said. “But we don’t know that, and we don’t know the status of that airlock—or who’s inside.”

“Deliberately decompressing a civilian airlock with people inside would be murder,” said Blackwood, nodding. She was right.

“Risking flushing civilians out into space on a *hunch* is not something I’m recommending, don’t worry.” He considered carefully but could see no immediate solution. “Dammit.”

“Ma’am,” said Blackwood eagerly. “The Chinese ships. They’re moving.”

“Moving?” asked Spears, curiously. “Where?”

“To the station,” Blackwood said, her words slipping out in a faint hiss. “To the hangar bay. Looks like they’ve noticed what we noticed.”

Well that wasn’t good.

“We have to decide now,” said Mattis, watching the Chinese fleet move toward the closed metal door on the side of the astroid. “Or we lose our chance to find Yim.”

Chapter Forty-Five

Shuttle
Hangar Bay
Chrysalis Station
Kepler-1011 system

Blair could feel Sammy's pulse weakening through the bandage, see the color drain out of his face, and see the growing rust-red stain below him on the shuttle's deck.

They had to do something. There was no time left.

"Help me," she pled with Yim. "I've never been off-world before. I don't know how to fix this."

Yim seemed lost in thought. Then his eyes lit up. "Hand me your communicator," he said.

She passed it over. It was flecked with splotches of blood. Yim cracked it open.

"Pilot," he said, speaking slowly and carefully into the intercom. "Listen to me very carefully. We have a shot and dying child back here, in need of critical medical care. Are the People's Republic Marines still in the hangar bay?"

"No," he said. "They pulled back. I think they got some kind of signal—they all got up together. Or maybe they just ran out of ammo."

That was good, right?

"And there's nobody else?" asked Yim.

He snorted. "With all the gunfire that's been rattling around in there, I'm pretty sure anyone in there rabbited a long time ago."

"How sure?" Him demanded.

The pilot hesitated. "Pretty sure?" There was a pause on the line. "Why?"

"Because," said Yim, "I want you to turn the ship around so that its rear is pointed toward the hangar bay doors. I want you to enable the magnetic

locks on the landing skids, and I want you to burn the engines until the door melts. Then when it's all pretty and red and soft… smash through it."

"Smash through it?" The pilot balked. "I already told the lady. I said this is a *trans-por-t.*"

"It can do it," said Blair, with a confidence that surprised everyone—especially her. "Transports have got to be tough. Not against missiles and shit, sure, but… space is dangerous. They have to be tough enough to survive reentry, and they've gotta survive the occasional micrometeor strike, surely."

"You are correct," said Yim. "Theoretically."

"*Theoretically*," stressed the pilot. "And what if there's someone hiding in here?"

"Pretty sure it'll be obvious as hell what we're doing, and pretty sure they're going to want to get the hell out of here before the *door melts*," Blair countered.

The radio was silent as the pilot considered, and finally he blew out a sigh that clipped in the microphone. "Sure, it's only my *life* we're risking here. And all of your lives."

"If we do something, we might all live," said Blair, glancing down at Sammy, more than aware that Reardon was probably listening in in the cockpit. "If we do nothing, this kid definitely dies."

A dark pall fell over everything, like a blanket made of grim realization. For a moment there was just silence. Nothing save the faint hiss of the open radio line, the hum of the atmospheric pump, and the faint whine of an unseen shuttle system.

"Okay," said the pilot. "What the hell. What's the worst that could happen?"

"Don't ask that," said Reardon over the line. "Hey, how are you, Sammy?"

Sammy was unconscious again, white as a sheet, barely moving. His lips had faded into an ominous pale color. "You better get down here," said Blair. "I'll tag out with you and hang out with our pilot."

"Okay," said Reardon, and then she could hear his footsteps clank against the metal deck.

"He'll be okay," said Yim, rubbing the back of his neck. "He'll be fine. A door like that… these kinds of engines will burn it down real quick. Don't worry about it."

“I’m not worried,” said Blair, hoping she sounded more sure of herself than he did.

They sat in silence for a moment, both pressing their biofoam bandages against either side of Sammy’s leg. Years in a wheelchair had shrunk the limb down to a thin stick. Hopefully it made the wound look more serious than it really was?

Reardon appeared at the rear of the shuttle looking grim and expectant. Blair attempted a reassuring smile as she swapped positions with him. Her hands were dripping with blood, and they left a thin spotty trail on the deck. So much blood…

Sammy would be okay.

She pushed open the safety door to the cockpit, closing it behind her, and it sealed with a faint hiss.

The pilot flicked a few switches. “Okay,” he said. “Ready to burn the hell out of an extremely expensive piece of station hardware?”

“Sure,” said Blair, slipping into the copilot’s seat and strapping in. She breathed deeply. No hiccups. “Just so you know,” she said lightly, “I might throw up on you.”

“Don’t like blood?”

“Don’t like flying.” She gave him a pointed glance. “Especially *rough* flying.”

The pilot only smiled, flicked a switch, and—with a faint hum—the engines kicked into life. Blair gripped her arms rests and looked determinedly forward. The ship spun in place, turning its rear toward the metal door, and then with a soft *clunk*, attached itself to the metal floor of the hangar.

“I’m Special Agent Denelle Blair, by the way,” she said. She inhaled deeply, letting the breath out slowly, trying to calm her nerves. “Just thought I should… you know. Let you know. Just in case something goes wrong. What’s your name?”

The pilot laughed, casually reaching for the throttle. “Not saying,” he said. “That’s bad luck.”

Bad luck? To tell me your name? Blair scrunched up her face as the engines built up power, a fiery red glow filling the inside of the hangar bay. She *really* hoped there was no one in there. Or she was currently committing murder.

Maybe the guy keeping his name to himself was wise.

Chapter Forty-Six

Shuttle
Hangar Bay
Chrysalis Station
Kepler-1011 system

As the energy built around them and the engines started to melt the door, Yim continued to apply pressure to Sammy's leg. The kid had drifted back to consciousness. He looked dazed. Confused. With a wound like his, shock was a certainty.

"How are you doing?" he asked, attempting a reassuring smile. "Sammy, right?"

The kid nodded. He looked so young. Maybe he just needed the lucky speech.

"So," said Yim, adjusting his grip on the pressure bandage. "I've commanded ships into battle before. I've lost people. I know when people are going to live, and when they're going to die, and you're a live-r, little one. That's what I'm telling you. And I know that… because right now, when things seem really bad, you're still here. You're still fighting.

"So many of us in our life are crippled by hardships. They suffer and they feel pain, and that pain drives them to give up. They receive a wound, they see their nations and their cultures under attack, mocked, insulted, beaten. They hang their heads and they just sort of accept that they are *done*. From within, a gnawing, powerful despair grows that drives them to seek out and establish order in their lives.

"And it's because of that that we are the luckiest people alive."

Reardon, who had been pretending not to listen, snorted loudly. "My brother has a fucking hole in his leg and the door is shut, and we're surrounded. How is that lucky?"

Yim took a breath, still smiling. "Who else could ever boast of the glory in overcoming these challenges? Who else, right in this moment, has the

whole world against them? We live in an age of heroes and tyrants. Of diabolical manipulators at the top of every organization, every institution down the tree of society, down to its very roots. In management. In every position of power. We live in the shadow of such pervasive evil, such tyranny and viciousness, that whole parts of society are trained to hate us. No time like this has ever existed. Yet, despite all those threats, we will defeat them all. And we will be remembered forever."

The engines built up power, and the temperature inside the ship rose ominously. Yim didn't pay it any attention. His focus was entirely on Sammy.

"Nobody's going to remember me," whispered Sammy.

"Nonsense." Yim chuckled. "On my old ship… I had a *World's Number One Dad* paperweight, covered in dust. I always forgot to polish it, but I never forgot what it represented."

Sammy smiled. "Okay."

Reardon glared. "Hey, no more talking, okay? Sammy should save his strength." He looked down at his brother. "C'mon, you little piece of shit. If you die here, I will fucking kill you, I swear on Dad's grave, so don't test me."

Every second that passed, Sammy looked a little bit worse. "Okay." Yim nodded. "No more talking." He reached up and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "Damn. It's getting hot in here."

"The engines are overheated," said Reardon. "They aren't designed to burn like this. The doors must be reflecting the heat."

"But that means it's absorbing most of it," said Yim. "It's working."

"Maybe," said Reardon, gently shaking his brother, trying to keep him conscious.

A warning klaxon sounded. *Overheating engines*.

"We'll find out soon enough," said Yim. "One way or the other."

Chapter Forty-Seven

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
Space, near Chrysalis

Mattis clicked his tongue as the *Caernarvon* raced the Chinese ships toward Chrysalis. It felt almost like old times, competing with the Chinese for a nebulous, unclear goal, riding a steel warship toward a point in space where in all likelihood some serious shit was going to go down.

He expected that it would feel good. Feel like he was twenty years younger. Instead it felt vaguely hollow—what was another war in the grand scheme of things?

More thoughts that he didn't have time to deal with. There were people in danger. He had to focus.

"What the devil's going on?" asked Spears, squinting as she leaned forward in her chair, pointing at the main monitor fixated on Chrysalis. "What's that?"

Then he saw it too. A faint red glow at the center of the hangar bay door, steadily growing outward like an angrily blooming rose. "Is there a fire?" he asked. "Some kind of thermal discharge?"

Blackwood tapped her wrist and the view on the monitor changed from optical to thermal. Sure enough, the hangar bay lit up like a giant oven, waves of heat emanating from the door and radiating off into space. "The heat signature comes from shuttle exhaust," she said, furrowing her brow at the murky thermal image. Suddenly, she jabbed at the screen where a fiery plume emanated—seemingly from nowhere. "Bloody hell, they're *burning* their way out."

"There's someone over there with a plan," said Mattis. "A really dangerous plan."

Spears stared at the screen. "They must be absolutely *barking*." She stood out of her chair. "Get those Chinese ships on the horn. I want to speak

with them."

"Ma'am, communications are still down," said Blackwood. She tapped at her wrist-mounted computer. "Trying anyway."

As Mattis watched, the red glow of the engine exhaust against the hangar bay door grew more intense and spread, the core turning yellow. The *Caernarvon* decelerated, and the Chinese ships did as well. The whole group drew closer.

"Can't raise them," said Blackwood.

Mattis felt his hands ball at his sides. The door buckled, the pressure of the atmosphere inside it warping the weakened metal. Hell, they might actually pull this off. "If it's stupid but it works," he said, "it isn't stupid."

"Indeed," said Spears. The *Caernarvon* pulled up in front of the door, barely a hundred meters away. The Chinese ships followed, forming a hemisphere behind them. It could definitely be construed as a threatening posture, but it wasn't overtly hostile.

They were playing chicken. Without a way to talk to each other.

A tiny lick of flame followed by escaping atmosphere trailed out of a breach in the door. Slowly, it began to melt and buckle, the contained pressure on the inside pushing it out like a giant zit—the side of Chrysalis growing and warping and distorting until, with a powerful decompression, it finally burst.

Flame and white gas hurled out into space, a giant tongue of fire that threatened to lick the hull of the *Caernarvon*. Within it, tumbling like a leaf in the wind, was the shuttle, thrown around by the decompression.

"Engage magnetic grappler," said Spears. "Lock onto that ship and retrieve it."

The Chinese would do the exact same thing, he was sure. They had access to the same technology and obviously wanted the ship as much as the *Caernarvon* did. Hopefully the British system would be faster. And more accurate.

"Grappler away," said Blackwood, and a thick magnet on a cable flew out from the *Caernarvon*, zooming straight toward the shuttle and latching hold to the top of the hull.

"Jolly good shot, Commander Blackwood," said Spears, smiling widely. "Now reel them in."

They began to, but one of the Chinese ships fired their grappler too, and the device stuck squarely to the port side of the shuttle.

“Shit,” said Spears, hissing faintly.

Blackwood scrolled her finger, picking up the speed of the wind-in, but Mattis knew that was dangerous. Who knew what structural damage the shuttle had experienced during its burn, and as they had just seen, heat could weaken metal. That hull must be hundreds of degrees. “Wait,” he said, holding up his hand. “We can’t risk tearing the shuttle apart.”

“Mmm,” said Spears, waving a hand. The cable wind-in stopped.

The Chinese must have been thinking the same thing, because they didn’t wind in either. The shuttle merely floated in space attached to both ships. It looked sickly, turning slowly in the vacuum, thick smoke trailing from its engines.

“This isn’t good,” said Spears, displaying that perfect British understatement. “Can we try to jerk it free?”

“Only if we want to pull the shuttle apart like a bread roll,” said Mattis, grimacing. “Those magnets are *strong*.”

“Blackwood tapped her foot rapidly, thinking hard. “Well, we could always try and cut their cable.”

“Cut it?” asked Mattis. “Like… how?”

Blackwood smiled sheepishly. “I was thinking with the forward cannon?”

Spears considered. “That’s mad,” she said. “The risk that we could damage the shuttle is high, and the risk that the Chinese could interpret that action as a threat is even higher still…” she grimaced. “But I don’t see any other option. Do it. Start to reel them in, and when there’s tension on the line, fire a single shot—armor piercing, we don’t want shrapnel to damage the hull—and then pull them in as fast as you can.”

“Aye aye, Ma’am,” said Blackwood. “Loading AP.”

Chapter Forty-Eight

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
Space, near Chrysalis

This was crazy, thought Mattis. But sometimes crazy was exactly what was needed.

"Gun ready," said Blackwood. "Locked onto that cable. Just say the word, Captain."

Spears paused—probably to consider her options and to make sure that this was really the only one—then nodded resolutely. "Fire."

With a shake and a rumble, the round flew out from the *Caernarvon*, streaking across space. For a moment Mattis thought it was a miss, but then the two halves of the Chinese cable came apart, glowing faintly at either end.

As quickly as it could, the British cable drew tight and began to tug, jerking the shuttle roughly back toward them.

"Medical teams to the hangar bay," said Spears, as the shuttle jostled around violently. That couldn't be easy on the people inside. "Commander Blackwood, prepare to initiate Z-space translation when the shuttle is aboard. Set course for Earth. It's time we got the hell out of here and away from this godforsaken place."

Mattis couldn't agree more. "The less time we spend in this system, the better I'll feel."

"Never thought I'd long for the persistent cold wet of England," said Blackwood.

Slowly, almost painfully, the little ship was tugged and jostled in toward the *Caernarvon*, drifting closer and closer to the open lip of her hangar bay.

Another Chinese ship fired a grappler which, fortunately, went wide. But then several of the gravity mines started to move on his radar screen. The Chinese had obviously engaged them. They *really* could not stay here.

“Prepare point defense,” said Spears. “Target and engage those grapplers and any mines within range. Keep them off the shuttle. Shoot anything that comes near them.”

“Aye, Ma’am,” said Blackwood. “Spinning up point defense on promiscuous mode.”

“Fifteen seconds until retrieval,” said Blackwood. “The hull has cooled somewhat, so we can bring it in a little faster.”

“Do it,” said Spears, defiantly. “I don’t think the Chinese are going to let us get much closer without—”

As though on cue, a chirp sounded across the bridge. The sound of an incoming transmission.

“Mysteriously,” said Blackwood, “it seems as though whatever interference was present has vanished, right when the Chinese want to talk to us.” Wondrous how that worked.

Spears adjusted her collar. “Put them through, audio only.”

Clear, and without a hint of interference, Captain Mei-Yin Long’s voice came over the bridge.

“*Caernarvon*, this is *Tianti Shan* actual. I think it’s about time we had a chat, don’t you agree?”

“Oh, I think that time has long since passed,” said Spears, her voice as unyielding as it was polite. “Call off your mines. We’ll be retrieving our vessel and departing post-haste. Thank you for your cooperation with our investigation. We’ll be leaving now.”

“The mines are no longer under our control. It is the people of Chrysalis who are trying to punish that shuttle for their actions.” Captain Long sighed down the line. “In any event, I’m afraid I cannot permit you to leave, Captain Spears. Your shuttle contains a person of interest to the People’s Republic and we demand unconditional access to him.”

“We don’t have him,” said Spears, simply. She looked at Mattis, shrugging slightly.

He could practically hear the sneer in Captain Long’s voice. “Of course not.”

Slowly, he began to understand. Mattis signaled for Blackwood to mute the call .

“He’s there,” Mattis said. “The away team found him. That’s why they want the shuttle—Yim is aboard.”

Nodding, Spears signaled to resume the communication.

“You are free,” said Spears, evenly, “to demand access to every star in the galaxy. This does not mean you are going to get it.” A slow smile came across her face. “I am curious to know what Yim will tell me, however. I’m sure my conversations with him will prove to be *very* enlightening.”

Captain Long’s voice dropped slightly, hardening into a threat. “Captain Spears, you are playing an extremely dangerous game. Once you start to pull a thread, the only avenue is to destroy your sweater. Nothing good ever comes to the curious. Ask the cat.”

“Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction bought it back,” Spears said brightly. “And speaking to Yim will be extremely satisfying, I promise you.”

Mattis grinned. The shuttle disappeared into the *Caernarvon*’s hull and the hangar bay doors closed with a rough slam. The readouts around the bridge showed the re-compression process, and then the Z-space engine started to charge, building up power. All around them the gravity mines closed in, flashing angrily as they swarmed toward the ship.

“You will regret this,” said Captain Long.

Spears cut the connection. “Execute Z-space translation,” she said. And the world around them faded out into nothingness, becoming a multispectral hue of light and color.

“Well done, everyone,” said Spears, settling back into her chair, a low sigh of relief escaping her lips.

Mattis smiled eagerly. “Feels good to have a win every now and then.”

“That it does,” she said.

There was a brief moment of silence, happy and pleasant and relieved.

“Captain Spears?” Blair’s voice came over the bridge. “Hey, it’s us. Admiral Yim wants to talk to Admiral Mattis right away.”

Spears hummed curiously, then gestured to Mattis. “Go. Take care of this. Let me know what he wants.”

“Will do,” said Mattis, and made his way toward the hangar bay.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Hangar Bay
HMS Caernarvon
Z-Space

Mattis was expecting a lot of things when he went to see the dented, half-melted shuttle in the *Caernarvon*'s hanger bay. But as its buckled loading ramp lowered, he was not expecting so much blood.

"What the hell happened here?" he asked, staring wide-eyed at the rusty red stains on the deck plating.

Blair came out to meet him, her hair tousled, her hands covered in blood. She had obviously thrown up, probably when the shuttle had pitched and rolled around when it had been towed in. "Sammy got shot," she said, simply. "He's in emergency surgery right now. Reardon's…" she clicked her tongue. "Just trying to deal with it all."

Mattis grimaced. "Damn. He going to be okay?"

To that, she just shrugged lightly. "I'm not a medic," she said simply.

Still unwilling to presume the answers to questions he didn't know for sure, Mattis played a little coy. "Did you get the lead?"

"Definitely did," said Yim, moving up from the rear of the shuttle and stepping down the loading ramp. He smiled warmly and extended his hand. "Good to see you again, Admiral."

He knew it. Yim himself, in the flesh. Mattis took his hand, giving it a firm shake. "It's Captain these days," he said, ruefully. He was getting mighty sick of explaining it over and over. "Court-martial. Loss of rank. All the bells and whistles. Lovely garbage."

"Hey," said Yim, grinning a little bit. "At least your government isn't trying to have you assassinated."

"Speaking of which…" Mattis squinted. "I saw a very interesting video starring you, and I was curious—"

“Wasn’t me,” said Yim, firm as a brick wall. “I promise you, Mattis. I wasn’t there, I didn’t shoot her, and when miss Apple showed me the footage—”

Blair spoke up. “It’s Special Agent Denelle Blair,” she said, tiredly. “The whole Apple thing was a… bad joke, and a bad cover.”

Yim stared, laughed, and then nodded understandingly. “It worked, though. That’s the benefit of accidents; a fake identity can sometimes be spotted because of its normalcy. A cover developed randomly might have a part of it that is totally absurd, but that is reality. So it is the absurdity that grants the cover an air of legitimacy. After all, nobody would be stupid enough to *actually* call their kid Detective Apple.”

Mattis had seen a lot of stupid in his years. Very little seemed to genuinely surprise him anymore. Or maybe he was just getting old. Old and past the threshold where this kind of life was an acceptable choice for him. Maybe he should consider retirement…

So many little nagging doubts, so subtle and yet so insidious. They ate at Mattis from within, stealing the joy from his life, the excitement, the purpose.

Or maybe that was just the gaping black hole Chuck had left in his life.

The dark, quiet thoughts weren’t genuine doubts of his abilities. It was just that nothing made sense anymore; the natural order of things had been shattered. Fathers weren’t supposed to outlive their sons.

“Hey,” said Blair, and he realized with a start that she had been talking to him. “You awake, Mattis?”

“Yeah,” he said, somewhat vaguely. “I was… It’s fine. I’m here. What’s up?”

“Well,” said Yim earnestly. “There… is something very important I have to tell you, Mattis.”

Mattis straightened up his back, trying to push everything else out of his mind. “Okay. I’m here. Go.”

“The Avenir,” said Yim, sighing softly. “I do know one thing. Chinese intelligence had discovered that there was a possibility there was a ship in the Sol system. Possibly in the shadow of Earth’s moon. There was a lot of chatter about it before I disappeared, and I have absolutely no idea if it’s related to Spectre and his cloning, but we would be fools to discount the possibility. It could be under his control. Or it could be hunting him. I don’t

know. The Chinese don't know its precise location—or at least they didn't last I heard,—but I promise you, there *is* a ship there."

Mattis grinned a little, despite himself. "Nope, I can personally guarantee you that there isn't. The *Caernarvon* found it and destroyed it. I almost got myself blown up salvaging bits from it. And … yes, it was controlled by Spectre, apparently. It started to fire on us before we slagged it."

"Ahh," said Yim, concerned. "But you're okay now?"

"Yeah."

That seemed to mollify him. "Find anything interesting?"

Mattis wasn't sure how much he should tell Yim, or Blair. But, to hell with it—he was sick of secrets. "A bunch of clones of the dead president. Schuyler."

Yim and Blair gasped.

"Wait," Blair said, "like… copies of her?"

"Perfect copies," The memory surfaced in Mattis's mind. "They even had suits on, as though they were frozen little Presidents, waiting to get popped out of the fridge and put into service."

"You make it sound like they're soldiers," said Yim.

"Spies *are* soldiers."

Suddenly, everyone was looking over his shoulder. At someone behind him.

"Hey," said Lieutenant Corrick, flanked by a pair of Marines and wearing a hospital gown, her head heavily bandaged. She was propping herself up using an IV stand and staring pointedly at Yim. How long had she been standing there? She looked *awful*, like she was half a foot in the grave already. "You're Admiral Yim, right?"

"Y-…es," said Yim, hesitantly. "Who are you?"

"I'm Lieutenant Patricia Corrick," she said, "and I know why the Chinese government was trying to kill you."

Chapter Fifty

Hangar Bay
HMS Caernarvon
Z-Space

Mattis frowned and turned on Corrick, folding his arms in frustration. “Are you sure you’re in a condition to be up and about?” he asked, casting a critical eye on her heavily bandaged head. She had been in surgery, presumably on her brain. That wasn’t the kind of thing one could just walk off.

Fighter pilots… they never knew when to quit.

“Oh, I’m pretty sure I’m *not,*” said Corrick, grunting softly and ambling forward like some kind of half-zombie, using the IV stand as a walking stick. “Pretty sure I am one sick motherfucker, physically and otherwise, but I…” she groaned, reaching up and touching the bandages on her head. “You *need* to know. When I was in surgery, they… they gave a lot of energy to the nanobots. And I got—I… I hallucinated a scene with Spectre.”

Mattis’s face clouded and he felt anger surge within him. “More of that bastard’s clones, I presume.”

“Mmm.” Corrick sighed. “So, funny you should mention clones and shit, right? Because…” She was obviously struggling, and not just from the painkillers, or the pain from surgery. “He… said that he could bring back Roadie and Flatline through cloning.”

“Like the clones of the president,” said Mattis, the memory of the rows of frozen corpses still fresh.

“Right, and you know what?” Corrick smiled grimly at Yim. “That’s probably why the Chinese military were trying to disappear you. Because they weren’t really the Chinese military at all, and they were going to, you know…” she jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “Get rid of you, and replace you with a clone they could control.”

It was an interesting theory, but Mattis didn't believe it. "What proof do you have of this?" he asked firmly. "Apart from the *possibly hallucinated* conversation with Spectre?"

Corrick took a long, low breath. "He said I was a clone too," she said, looking away at a bulkhead. "Look, I know it's crazy, but… I feel like it's true."

Well, as long as they were making plans based on *feelings*… "That isn't really good enough."

"I know, I know." Corrick held up a hand. "But look, there's a way to find out who has these things in their heads now, right? We know that for an objective *fact*." Her voice hardened. "And we know they can make people do things. And make people… *act* normal, blend in, until they do horrible things."

Mattis blinked. Opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. Corrick looked him straight in the eyes, if swaying slightly. "Right," Mattis said.

"Right. Then we should test everyone." Corrick swept her hand energetically around the hangar bay, and her knees buckled. One of her Marine guards—a tall kid with vaguely Middle Eastern features—sprang forward to catch her, but she swatted him away impatiently. "Everyone aboard this ship as a starting point. Then we should check Goalkeeper and the various other satellite defense stations all around the galaxy, and also…" her eyes flicked to Yim. "Also we should share this technology with the Chinese. They need it. There's no doubt in my mind that Spectre has agents in the PRC as well."

"Most likely," conceded Yim.

Mattis let that rattle around inside his head for a little moment. "So, theory," he said, saying the words as soon as they came into his head. "The Spectre-aligned agents in the PRC were trying to get Yim quietly arrested so that they could replace him with a clone. But when he escaped and disappeared, well, that was good enough for them to move forward with whatever plan they wanted to originally put into motion anyway. But they know Yim is still alive now. So they want to wrap up that loose end."

"That's what I was thinking," said Corrick. She reached up and adjusted the IV, giving herself more drugs. Not very safe behavior, but Mattis wasn't about to tell her off; they were working together now, it seemed. He could look at her for more than a minute now without wanting to throw something, and the kid was obviously in a lot of pain.

“It’s a great theory,” Mattis said slowly. “But… why?”

Corrick shrugged. “I dunno. I’m not a mind reader. Well, technically, given that messed up dream, I guess I am—or rather, I was. Until the nanobots got removed.” She grimaced. “But I dunno why Spectre would want to replace Yim. Or why anyone would.”

“Maybe they wanted my ship,” said Yim, considering. “I’m a high ranking PRC Naval officer. They might have wanted me to be in their power because…” he paused, eyes widening. “Because they wanted to restart the Sino-American war. Imagine, Mattis, if you still had the *Midway*, and you were their puppet? You could fire on Earth, you could fire on a Chinese warship.There would be no limit to the amount of damage you could cause.”

Of course. Make humanity fight itself so that there would be no way they could defend themselves against Spectre, or further Avenir attacks. It was only a theory, but it made sense.

“Right,” said Mattis, frustration mounting. “But we have no *proof*—”

“Actually, we do,” said a voice from inside the shuttle. Reardon. His voice thin and scratchy. “Sorry to eavesdrop, but, Mattis—there was a *reason* we were trying to nab the salvage back when you nearly got yourself frozen to death.” He coughed pointedly, then had to blow his nose, destroying the intended effect. “When we saved your ass,” he finished.

“Okay,” said Mattis, raising his voice so he could be heard from inside the shuttle. It made sense why Reardon didn’t want to come out, but still. They had important things to discuss. “What’s that?”

A pause. Then, “I needed to know what was inside the thing. Not because it might be valuable, not because I wanted to know or anything, but I needed to give Sammy more time to work it out. Because… it’s not about me being Han Solo. It’s about *him*.” Reardon looked away. “This life I lead? It’s great. Honestly. It is. It’s perfect for me… but it’s not for him. It’s not just his legs either. It’s everything. He’s… too good for this.”

“I understand,” said Mattis, softly.

“Anyway.” Reardon brushed some invisible dust off his chest. “The computer. Sammy got a lot of information once it was turned on—information about the clones. Something about genetic markers in their DNA. And more than just the brutish mutants, too… in *regular* people. Or mutants that were human enough to pass as human. And I wanted to find out more.”

A memory flickered into Mattis's mind. "That's right," he said, the memories coming back to him like a lightning bolt through his brain. "The mito-… mito…" he snapped his fingers, trying to remember. "Some DNA in the mutants is shared. It's a part of them and it's shared, and it means that… we can figure out who's a clone, because *all* the clones have that. That'll work on humans too?"

"Yeah," said Reardon. "Bratta developed a working prototype. It's crude, but it does the job. I've seen it in action. It works."

"Great," said Corrick, coughing wetly. "You should test my blood. I'll get Doctor Manda to extract some for you."

"We'll all need to be tested," said Blair, wincing. "I hate needles."

Corrick upped her medication again. She should definitely stop doing that. "But," she said, "we should test *us* first. The people in this room. Just in case. Because if we tip anyone off, and they're a clone, whatever screwed up programming is in their heads might activate. A kind of… fail safe."

"Is that possible?" asked Mattis. A slight worming doubt whispered into his ear. What if Corrick was still… *affected?* What if the whole thing was just more of Spectre's lies, more of his manipulations? What if he was talking to one of Spectre's agents right now?

You're getting paranoid, old man. So paranoid you can't tell good from bad anymore.

Corrick's tired eyes were full of an emotion he couldn't identify. "They got me to shoot my two best friends," she said, flatly. "They can make you do *anything*."

"Right," said Mattis. It was like Spears had said; either they trusted her, or they didn't. "So. All of us, on my authority, let's head down to the infirmary and test this shit. What do we need?"

"Just something from my ship," said Reardon.

"Get it. Then let's get going. We're not far from Earth, and we have to get this shit sorted *now*. Before more people…" he wanted to say *die*, but a glance at Reardon told him that was a bad idea. "Get hurt."

"You can just say die," said Reardon, cutting the connection angrily.

Chapter Fifty-One

Corridor en route to the Infirmary
HMS Caernarvon
Z-Space

Clones. Nanobots. Cloaking devices. Mass drivers… Mattis ruminated on the discussion they'd just had. Spears had been right. Spectre was full of tricks, in all his incarnations, whether he was working through Avenir he controlled, or shadowy factions within the Chinese military, or the United States government for that matter. He seemed to be everywhere, making it impossible to know who to trust.

But he had to make mistake. Eventually. And Mattis had to be ready for it.

He stomped his feet along the deck as he walked, trying to keep his temper under control. Mattis didn't like to lose—most people didn't—but the loss of Chuck had been slowly chewing at him, eating away at his restraint.

Humanity needed something. They needed their own edge, or at least to level the playing field.

"Hey, slow down," panted Corrick.

He did so, suddenly realizing he had been storming ahead of everyone. "Sorry," he said, feeling a tinge of guilt. "You know you shouldn't even be up…"

"I know, but I needed to." Corrick shuffled forward, her IV stand squeaking. "I gotta find out if I'm real, you know?"

"Pretty certain you are real, Lieutenant."

"You know what I mean. I mean if… if I'm not the *real* Corrick, what happened to the real me? And why do I have her memories?"

Mattis wasn't sure what to say. "Does it matter what you find out?"

"Not really," said Corrick. "But I should still know anyway." She hobbled along. "Also, I guess, I should probably get a new callsign."

That made him chuckle. “What’s your current one?”

“Guano,” she said. “Everyone calls me that. Maybe I’ll get a new one. Scalper. Or Psycho… or TK.”

“TK?”

“Teamkiller.” Well, that kind of put a damper on things. “Or something else.” She shrugged. She was speaking rapidly, her eyes dilated and words slurred. “A callsign is meant to be embarrassing, or humiliating. Like… a constant reminder of that time you ate twenty pounds of gummy bears and threw them all up in a porta potty at a rock concert in Arizona, and because it was so hot all the puke melted, so when the next person entered the porta potty, they got stuck to the seat and the fire department had to be called to unstick them.”

A very specific example. “Did that really happen?”

Corrick coughed wetly again. “Uhh… no.”

Right. Mattis lead the crew toward the infirmary in silence, entirely unconvinced that gummy bears could cause such a powerful adhesive effect, but very unwilling to question a person who had just undergone massive brain surgery and was undoubtedly high on some serious uppers.

Which, he was forced to remind himself, was also a problem. If Corrick’s cognitive abilities were all scrambled, how did he know there was anything in what she was telling him? She might well believe it, but even so…

It was an awful risk.

Maybe he was wrong to trust her. Maybe his guilt for blaming her and withholding forgiveness was making him act stupidly. Maybe he should do what he always did; go it alone.

But that approach hadn’t worked, and Chuck had implored him to take another route. To put his trust in people. To use kindness. To be the champion he could be.

Mattis had to forgive her, he had to trust her, and he *had* to listen to his gut. She was on their side—he had to believe it…

Chuck would have wanted him to.

Yim and Blair helped carry the heavy equipment needed, sharing the load all the way to the infirmary. By the time they arrived, the whole area seemed to be in chaos, with doctors and nurses running around like headless chickens. One of the medical technicians grabbed Lieutenant Corrick with a mixture of firmness and care. “You! We’ve been looking all over for you!”

“Hello!” said Corrick, and collapsed into the technician’s arms.

“What the hell are you doing out of your bed?” A doctor stared at her, wild eyed. Her badge read *Doctor Manda, Neurosurgery*. “You can’t be walking around in your condition!” She shouted.

The technician lowered Corrick gently onto an examination table.“Well, I am, so…” Corrick looked down at the table, blinking blearily, then began to curl into the fetal position like a sleepy child. Then she sat up with a gasp —“But we need to talk to you right away!” She leaned in unsteadily, dilated eyes glistening. “In private.”

“No,” said Doctor Manda, in a tone that suggested she was not in a mood for arguing. “You’re an *idiot* to be up and about at this time. You just had major surgery! You have to go back to your bed immediately.”

“Okay,” said Corrick, nodding in agreement. “I’ll do that. I will go to bed and I promise, I swear to you, I will stay there. On one condition.”

Doctor Manda scowled. “Is that one condition that I handcuff you there? Because, as the CMO on this ship, I do have that power. And I will. You have no bargaining power here, Lieutenant. I *can* force you to stay in bed and I *will*.”

“Fine.” She held out her wrists. “Take me there. Chain me down if you want. I’ll deal with it. But I need you to do one thing for me first.”

Mattis needed her cooperation. “It’s important,” he said. “And we can tell you more in Corrick’s room.”

“I do have other patients,” said Doctor Manda sharply. “You do realize that, right? An injured civilian was just bought in here—”

“That’s my brother,” said Reardon, jumping forward. “I need to see him. Is he okay?”

Doctor Manda hesitated. “I… haven’t been attending his surgery personally,” she said, her tone suddenly at once sympathetic and formal. A tone Mattis knew all too well. Bedside manner. “But I have seen the report. In passing.” She glared at Corrick. “I was busy trying to find *you*.”

“Just give it to me straight,” Reardon said, his face paling. “Just tell me, okay?”

“I can’t say,” said Manda.

“I’m his brother,” said Reardon. “I have to know…”

“It’s okay,” said Mattis.

There was a terribly brief, yet terribly *intense* pause, where Doctor Manda was obviously summoning her courage. “I’m very sorry,” she said,

reaching out and touching Reardon's arm. "He'll never walk again. The X-ray showed that his back has been—"

"Broken?" Reardon looked like he was about to explode. "I *know that*, he's been in a wheelchair for *years*. How's his *leg?*"

"Oh." Doctor Manda said, her cheeks flushing. "I… I'm sorry, I only glanced at the report. The, uhh, gunshot wound on his leg has been repaired, and although he's lost a lot of blood…" she smiled. "He should be fine. Normally I would warn you that the bone is broken and there is some damage from bullet fragments to his knee which, in normal circumstances, would lead to a limp, but… obviously that's not going to be a huge problem."

"I'm sure he'll be fine," said Reardon, letting out a huge guffaw. "What a… phew! What a loser. Stupid, dumb loser who got his dumb self shot!"

"Yes," said Doctor Manda. "He'll be fine."

Some good news at last.

"Okay," said Mattis, turning to Corrick's Marine escorts. "Take this wayward pilot back to her bed. And then, Doctor, I need you to perform a number of extremely sensitive tests. We must secure this ship and make certain that every one of us is who we say we are."

Chapter Fifty-Two

Infirmary
HMS Caernarvon
Z-Space

Mattis followed Doctor Manda into Corrick's room, watching as she was laid out on the bed, groaning softly as she stretched out.

"You've taken a lot of painkillers *and* a lot of stimulants," said Doctor Manda, crossly. "That's bad for your heart."

"So's being an evil clone, probably," said Corrick, whining in pain. "It certainly hasn't been good for my head."

Yim and Reardon set up the heavy computer equipment in one corner. Doctor Manda regarded them disapprovingly "Has that stuff been cleared to be installed here?" She ran her finger along one of the sides, the digit coming off with a load of dust. "Or cleaned? Ever?"

"Once a year," said Reardon, grinning sardonically. "No matter if it needs it or not. Bratta left it with us, and it was dusty when we got it, so it's not our responsibility."

Mattis touched the doctor's shoulder. "It's okay," he said. "I've seen this stuff in action. It's not a drama. It works, and it's… very Reardon-esque. Dirty and slow as hell, but it does the job."

"Hey," said Reardon, frowning and putting his hands on his hips. "I am not slow." He turned back to Doctor Manda, grinning widely. "But I am dirty. Hey, wanna play nurse with me?"

"Sure," said Doctor Manda, unsmiling, giving only a tired edge to her voice that said she had heard this joke a thousand times. "I'll go get the rectal thermometer. Extra large gauge for you, of course."

"Sounds like fun," grinned Reardon.

Doctor Manda rolled her eyes, groaning just like Corrick had done. "Maybe I should give myself some of that happy juice. Just to dull the pain in my ears."

Reardon snorted. “Babe, lemme sooth your—”

“Don’t call me that,” said Doctor Manda. “I can have you sedated. Not even joking.”

“Doctor,” said Reardon, smiling sweetly. “Let’s get down to business. So this stuff, right? The way it works is pretty simple. All the clones have identical DNA. But DNA is real complicated—”

“I know how DNA works. You remember what I just said, that I’m a surgeon?”

“Yeah,” said Reardon, continuing on as though she hadn’t said anything at all. “In every human being, there’s mitochondria; organelles that sit inside us like little…” he waved his hand around weirdly. “Fireflies.”

“Wrong,” said Doctor Manda.

Again, unperturbed, Reardon kept going. “Mitochondria are sweet and cool, but unlike the rest of us ugly sacks of dirty water, they have their own set of DNA. Two clones will be identical, but their mitochondria are going to be different. Unless, of course, the mitochondria were grafted in by science freaks and medical doctors in some freakish future lab.”

“Hey, careful about calling people freaks,” said Doctor Manda. “I’m going to enjoy stabbing you.”

Reardon laughed. “So that’s how we tell. We take a look at that shit, and then we compare the shit to other shit, and if the shit is fake, then you are a fake human, my friend.”

Doctor Manda sighed and took out a syringe. “Okay, now that the not-doctors have finished bullshitting around with only enough vocabulary to convince normal people that they’re smarter than they *really* are… who wants to be stabbed first?” She smiled sweetly. “Mister Reardon?”

“Sure,” said Reardon, rolling up his sleeve. “Penetrate me, doc. Then put the blood on the little dish thingie there, and hit *Return*. That’s the *Enter* key, by the way.”

With palpable enjoyment, Doctor Manda stabbed Reardon in the arm with the syringe, probably more violently than she needed to. “Oopsie,” she said.

Reardon whimpered.

Slowly, Doctor Manda pulled back the blood, and let it trickle onto the dish. The computer chirped, the machine whirred, and then it came up with a bright solid green square.

MITOCHONDRIAL MATCH:
NEGATIVE

"Congratulations," said Mattis. "You're a human."

"Thanks." Reardon rolled down his sleeve. "That's debatable once I've had a few drinks in me, but it's nice to know that science is on my side."

"Very debatable," said Doctor Manda. "Maybe we should repeat the test a few hundred times, just to make sure. Can't be too careful after all."

"You should go next," said Reardon, sticking out his tongue like a child.

Obligingly, Doctor Manda stuck herself with a fresh needle and tested herself.

MITOCHONDRIAL MATCH:
NEGATIVE

"Almost wish it had said yes," said Doctor Manda, "then I might be able to convince one of my clones to stand in for me on my duty shifts."

Mattis stuck out his arm impatiently. "I might as well go next," he said.

Doctor Manda obligingly slid a fresh needle into his arm. Unlike Reardon's squirming discomfort, Mattis barely felt a thing.

As the blood was scanned, Mattis's chest suddenly tightened. What would happen if it came up red? What would he do if he wasn't *himself?*

What would that mean for his career?

What would that mean for everything?

MITOCHONDRIAL MATCH:
NEGATIVE

"Admiral Jack Mattis, you are a bonafide human," said Corrick sleepily.

It was a much bigger relief than it should have been. Mattis let out a breath that he didn't even realize he'd been holding.

Yim stifled a strange little laugh. "You know, during the war, we used to joke that the Americans were genetic mutts; beings of such mismatched, untraceable lineage that they were basically no longer human. Guess that part was all Chinese propaganda."

He snorted. "You should get tested too," said Mattis, grinning a little bit. "Just in case it's true what they were saying during the war… that the

Chinese are bug-men collectivists who had long ago given up their humanity."

"At least you're being honest," said Yim, rolling up his sleeve.

MITOCHONDRIAL MATCH:
NEGATIVE

"Not a bugman," said Mattis.

"I'll go next," said Blair, rolling up her sleeve and looking away. "Just… make it quick."

Doctor Manda stuck her too, then once again, tested her blood.

MITOCHONDRIAL MATCH:
NEGATIVE

Blair laughed nervously. "Is it weird to be worried about the result? Like, you know, as though…" she stammered a bit. "A-as though I *knew* it wasn't going be positive, but I just… there was always just a creeping doubt in the back of my mind that wouldn't go away. That wouldn't be…" she trailed off.

"It'd be weird," said Mattis, "if you *weren't* worried."

"Mmm," said Blair, not seeming convinced. "We're sure the machine works, right?"

"If you wanna check," said Corrick, "make sure you do me. Pretty sure it'll say yes."

Doctor Manda took out a small chip. "We don't have to worry about Sammy or Corrick's blood," she said. "We have samples left over from their surgeries. We can also do the rest of the crew this way, speed up the process, as long as they've had some kind of medical treatment aboard this ship." She tapped the device onto the dish, then touched her wrist computer. "Let's do Sammy first."

Once again, the screen lit up; a bunch of symbols, letters, and numbers scrolled past, displaying nonsense, ending in a bright green flash.

MITOCHONDRIAL MATCH:
NEGATIVE

Reardon pumped his fist. “That’s my bro.”

“You called him an idiot before,” said Mattis. “Several times, in fact.”

“That’s just how it works. Big brothers picking on their little brothers is *intergalactic law*.”

Doctor Manda turned to Corrick. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” said Corrick, taking in a breath. “Hit me, doc.”

Carefully, Doctor Manda tapped at her wrist computer, and then touched the key to the plate again.

MITOCHONDRIAL MATCH:
NEGATIVE

“Whoa,” said Corrick, genuinely surprised. “Wait. I’m human too? *No way*.”

Doctor Manda tilted her head. “First scientific proof you have a brain, and now, scientific proof you are in fact a human being. Pretty soon, Lieutenant Corrick, you’re going to have scientific proof that *all* your fears and silly jokes are all in vain.”

She didn’t seem to take that very well, biting down angrily on her lower lip.

“This is a good thing,” said Mattis, trying his best to be reassuring. “It was just a hallucination. You’re human. Machine says so. So don’t worry about it.”

Corrick wouldn’t accept it. She pushed herself up onto her elbows. “It might be a false positive,” she said, stubbornly. “Just test me again. C’mon, test me again.”

“No. Corrick. You are *human*. And we have a lot of other tests to do.”

For a moment she seemed to accept it, but then, a strange look came over her. “Wait,” she said, “that blood. You said you took the samples during surgery?”

“That’s right,” said Doctor Manda, confused.

“And that was during the *brain surgery*, right?”

“Right.”

Mattis knew where she was going with this. “The clones,” he said, “are grown without brains. And another brain, presumably, is put inside it. So it might be blood from the *real* Lieutenant’s brain, but not her real body. But, admittedly, we know very, very little about Spectre’s process.”

Corrick stuck out her arm. “Doctor, let’s say you have a friend who wants to do something kinda risky, and she needs someone to help her out, and that friend is me and I need you to test my blood. Just this time fresh from the source.”

Although she seemed reluctant, Doctor Manda nodded and slid in a needle, pulled back the plunger, and deposited the pool of red blood onto the plate.

The machine whirred again, clicked, and then let out a loud *gong*.

MITOCHONDRIAL MATCH:
CLONE DETECTED

The noise echoed around the room. Mattis could have heard a pin drop.

“Fuck,” said Corrick, slumping back in her bed, staring at the screen, her mouth hanging open. “Fuck me, it’s real. I’m… I’m a clone.”

Chapter Fifty-Three

Infirmary
HMS Caernarvon
Z-Space

The test had revealed Lieutenant Corrick was a clone. Mattis could not imagine what she was thinking.

"I'm not real," she said again, stammering over her words. "I…I'm not real."

"You *are* real," said Mattis, resting his hand on her shoulder. He was surprised at how easily and genuinely the reassurance came. He felt nothing but pity. "It's the same thing I told Pitt: you are what your actions make you. You're real."

"No I'm not," said Corrick, her breath picking up. "And—and that means… oh god. That means I'm not the real Patricia Corrick. The real Patricia Corrick died in the battle of Chrysalis."

"I'm sorry," he said, and he meant it. "This has… got to be difficult for you."

Corrick seemed to struggle with the idea, shaking her head as though trying to clear out the cobwebs, trying to find something that would refute the giant red screen in front of her, then she just slumped down on her bed.

"Look," he said, turning back to the screen. "When we tested the blood from your brain, it came up human. That means that while they cloned your *body*, they kept your brain. That means that whatever else you might be, you are definitely the one and true Lieutenant Patricia Corrick." He smiled politely. "Just with a little upgrade."

"Upgrade." Corrick seemed to like the word. "Right."

He wanted to spend some time with her, talking it over, but he couldn't. "Okay, Doctor Manda, we need to start testing the whole crew, starting with Captain Spears." He gave a polite smile. "You're the only one with the authority to order her down here. Do her first, then we'll do Commander

Blackwood, then work from the bridge crew down. Officers first, then enlisted, then any civilians we missed."

Doctor Manda's face scrunched up, and she tilted her head back slightly.. Mattis remembered, with a guilty stab, that she was not formally under his command, and he was not even British.

"Right," said Doctor Manda, seeming to come to a decision on the matter. "I'll get right on it."

"I'm going to go check out my little bro," said Reardon.

"Third door on the left. Try not to get lost, I'm not coming out there to find you." Doctor Manda touched her radio. "Infirmary to bridge."

"Speaking," said Commander Blackwood, her voice tinny through the radio.

"I need Captain Spears down here immediately. Not urgently, but sharpish. ASAP."

The request, as Mattis expected, clearly surprised her. "Can it wait? We're about to have a shift change, and the Chinese have us on the horn, blathering a bunch of stuff about violating international protocol, and the Chrysalis representative is in on the call, blathering about breaking the NAP." She stifled a laugh. "Believe me, I wish we had more witnesses to this because it is *lovely*."

Mattis couldn't help but chuckle along too.

"I'm afraid it can't," said Doctor Manda. "Wait, that is. Not for anything more important than *critically urgent*. Don't worry, I'll be calling you down pretty soon, too, so don't get too attached to the bridge."

Blackwood tittered down the line. "I practically live here, Doctor."

"And you know I don't like that. My disapproval is profound, Commander."

Spears spoke up. "Well, I'm afraid she's going to have to stay up here for a little bit longer yet. But never fear, I'm on my way. Stand by."

Doctor Manda called over one of the nurses and had her put a kettle on. By the time Spears arrived, a steaming mug of English Breakfast was waiting for her.

"Captain on deck," said Mattis.

Spears raised a curious eye at the crowd of people, along with the computer equipment scattered around. Finally, her gaze fell upon Yim. "Admiral Yim, I presume," she said, extending a hand. "You're a popular man these days. And a difficult man to get hold of."

Yim took it and shook firmly. “I think my reputation has preceded me. And while it’s true that I’m somewhat…*sought after*…by the People’s Republic of China Army Navy, I doubt very much that I would enjoy their hospitality.” He gestured toward the computer. “And at least, now, I can prove to them that what happened to me was entirely unjust. Hell, I might even be able to get my command back.”

“I’ll testify at any hearing,” said Spears, her eyes briefly flicking to Corrick. “Or at least send in a favorable report. For what good that will do.”

“Eh, it’s fine, Captain,” said Corrick, reaching up and putting her hands behind her head. “Turns out I’m a doppelgänger.”

Spears stiffened slightly. “We have a clone aboard?”

“That is correct,” said Mattis, “but we’ve confirmed as best we can that her brain is the original, and while she’s seemingly got a new body, it’s… her. For lack of a better word.”

Spears didn’t say anything for a moment. Then, slowly, she seemed to accept it. “If you say so, then that’s enough for me.” She smoothed down her uniform. “Very well. What did you need me down here for?”

“To take your bloooooood,” said Corrick, waving her arms around like some kind of ghost. “Woooo…”

Spears affixed Corrick with a dark, piercing look.

“… Captain,” said Corrick, sheepishly. “Sorry. I’m… on a lot of painkiller medication right now.”

“I see,” said Spears, evenly. She turned to Mattis. “Jack?”

“We need,” said Mattis, “to test your blood—and the blood of your senior staff in descending order of priority—to ensure that you’re not clones. It’s easier than checking everyone for nanoprobes with the machine, and as we’ve established, it can lead to some… interesting results.”

Spears didn’t seem impressed. “How long is this going to take?”

“Not long,” said Mattis. “A few minutes tops.”

She shook her head. “No, thank you. I’m not a clone. Now, if you excuse me, I am returning to the bridge so that I can oversee the bickering between—”

“I’m afraid,” said Doctor Manda, firmly, “I cannot allow that.”

Spears’s eyes nearly fell out of her head. “I’m sorry?”

“Captain Spears, it is my recommendation as the CMO of this vessel—a position I know you treat with extreme gravity—that every single human being aboard be tested using this machine. Given that the effect of nanobots

can result in mental instability, it is within my authority to *order* you to remain here until the tests are complete."

"This is ridiculous," said Spears, scowling more darkly than an incoming storm. "Are you quite finished?"

"I will be," said Doctor Manda, standing firm. "When your test is complete, Captain."

For a moment, Mattis thought Spears was going to lose her temper. A strange, tense silence fell over everything as all eyes fell upon Spears.

"Captain?" asked Mattis, carefully.

With a long sigh, Spears rolled up her arm, squinting angrily and looking away. "Just bloody do it, then," she said, in obvious discomfort. "Fff…."

"I'm sorry," said Doctor Manda, sticking the needle in. Spears visibly flinched. Then the plunger was withdrawn and the blood added to the disk.

The machine worked, buzzing and whirring, and then it clicked, displaying its answer.

MITOCHONDRIAL MATCH:
NEGATIVE

"Now," said Spears, taking in a deep breath and quickly recovering her composure. "If you are *quite* finished…"

"Very good, Captain," said Doctor Manda. "You're free to go. Please order Commander Blackwood down here; we have to test her next."

Angrily, Spears touched her radio. "Captain Spears to bridge."

"This is Blackwood."

"Commander, your presence is requested in the infirmary," said Spears. "I'll be back up to the bridge in a jiffy. How goes the banter?" She grunted with frustration. "Are they still threatening to shoot each other?"

"I'm afraid," said Blackwood, "that you have bigger problems."

"What's that?" asked Spears, her frustration evaporating.

Silence. And then Blackwood's voice shifted ever-so-slightly, becoming one that Mattis knew much too well. "Do you know how easy it is to hide a British accent aboard a Royal warship?" said Spectre.

Chapter Fifty-Four

Infirmary
HMS Caernarvon
Z-Space

Mattis knew immediately who was speaking.

"Motherfucker," he said, the word slipping out like venom from his lips. Spectre… he had followed him even *here,* to the *Caernarvon*. Right under his nose the whole time.

"A slightly *different* motherfucker," said Blackwood-Spectre, her voice light and chirpy. "I'm sorry for the repeated deceptions, *Captain* Mattis…" she stressed the word. "But you do make it all too easy."

He took stock of the faces around the room. Spears, Doctor Manda, Yim, Reardon, Corrick, Blair.

Spears was stoic as ever, but the tightness of her eyebrows revealed the effort she was taking to contain herself. Doctor Manda looked like she'd swallowed a fly. Yim's hand was resting on his sidearm, idly fingering the grip. Corrick, still looking like death warmed up, had her hands drawn into tight fists, like she was going to punch through the bulkheads to get to Spectre. Blair's hand shook, her face drawn back as though he'd put a gun to her face.

But he could only focus on Blackwood. On Spectre.

At least they had a way of testing humans for clone status. But of course, it had been too little, too late. Typical. "So," Mattis asked. "Where's the real Blackwood? Or have you been playing her forever?"

"Not forever," said Spectre, humming quietly. "Just long enough to get what I wanted." She laughed ever so lightly. "Which I'm guessing is a little something that's eluded you, even to this moment."

He shrugged. "Gotta be honest—who knows anymore? There are so many of you, and so many of you that are dead and gone, that it's impossible to keep track of what you limey bastards want on any particular

given day. So, is this where I need to come marching up to the bridge and put a bullet in your head?"

Spectre blew out a long sigh that crackled into the microphone. "Why are you always so violent, Mattis? Why can't the two of us just get along?"

Get along? "Maybe," said Mattis, "you might know a bit more about cooperation between people if you didn't murder everyone who crossed your path."

"Yes, well," said Spectre, with mock sincerity. "Life is full of regrets. Like this bridge crew here… so young, and yet, so brittle."

Spears looked livid.

"Who's Spectre?" whispered Blair.

"Spectre is a… an…" Spears struggled with the right word. "An aborted tadpole. Some nut who's able to open portals to the future, and who, despite all our best efforts, *just won't die*."

Mattis leaned up against the foot of Corrick's bed, idly fiddling with his radio. "So I'm guessing we're trapped in the infirmary," he said, baiting Spectre for information, filling in the gaps where he could. "That's why you waited until Spears came down here."

"Oh no," said Spectre. "No no no. Nothing at all like that. You wound me, Mattis."

"Oh, believe me," he said, voice filling with dark promise. "I will."

Spectre just laughed. "But, yes. I'm actually finished with my job up here. And I don't see the harm in filling you in; there's a certain enjoyment that comes with telling poor unfortunate souls about the things that frustrate them but they cannot change." She clicked her tongue. "Not sure if you felt it or not, but we've left Z-space. The Chinese are here. They're angry. Stupid, but angry. What they don't understand is that we… *I*… am pulling the strings here. I'm going to have the ship fire a few rounds, then tap a few buttons on Blackwood's little gizmo—oh, it is so very quaint, isn't it?—and then… pop goes the Chinese warship."

Blowing up some warships. Hardly something that fit Spectre's grand vision.

"That's it?" he asked, probing for more information. "So you kill a couple of hundred Chinese, and then frame us for it?"

"Frame you? Oh, Mattis. Tragic, poor, small-minded Mattis, still thinking everything I do is about him, or that I care about his fate in any way."

“Okay,” said Mattis flatly. “So what’s the game plan here, Spectre? Enlighten me.”

“Well, first of all, I genuinely don’t care about you in the slightest.” Mattis could practically *feel* Spectre’s nasty smile down the line. “Nor about the Chinese, nor about killing them. They are bags of meat sitting between me and something I want. I just need their engines; their lives are of no consequence to me, one way or the other, although I will confess that erasing them would probably be much easier than trying to unravel whatever foolish scheme they will no doubt use to try and trick me. But at present, they are merely a physical *thing* between me and something I desire. ”

Of course. The Chinese engines warped Z-space *just so*, and could be used not only to travel quickly through the strange, non-Euclidean dimension, but also to open portals to the future. Apparently precursors to the future technology the Avenir used to travel back to their past, his present. “I think I see where this is going.”

“Do you?” Spectre snorted. “The only reason you’re here is because I needed you to find those space-rats, the Reardons, to track down my Chinese bait for me.” Admiral Yim stared at the floor, breathing hard. “That’s right, my dear Admiral Yim. Bait. That’s all you’re good for. And magnificent bait you were. The Chinese high command would have risked anything to track you down and make a public, gruesome example of you—a way for them to save face given that one of their own killed the American president. However, the slippery bastard you are, even I couldn’t find you. But you, Mr. Reardon. I knew *you* would be able to track him down, if only I could drag you out of your pathetic wallowing—”

“—So,” Mattis steamrolled over the endless gloating, “the killing of the President, the mirror on the hull, opening the cryo-chamber on that refrigeration unit, *everything*… all of it was just so that we would find the Reardons?”

Reardon let out a harsh belly laugh. “I’m flattered you went through so much just to meet me. So why couldn’t you find Yim yourself, you stupid son of a bitch?”

Spectre sipped in air tightly through her teeth. “Because,” she deliberately cooed, “Unlike some, I have no time to roll around in the sludge with trash and whores.”

“You fucking bastard,” Reardon muttered. “You nearly killed my brother—”

Spectre sighed loudly. “This has been a lovely chat, and I must thank you all for accomplishing my aims so perfectly and obliviously.

“You have been a most loyal hunting dog, Mattis. You deserve a treat. And you too, Yim, as soon as my engines are delivered to me. Oh, and your ship, Captain Spears. *That*, I cannot do without.”

“Sod off,” she spat.

Mattis straightened his back. “Now hear this. You’ve played your game, you’ve had your fun, but I want to be totally clear… if you attack those PRC sailors, I promise you, I won’t kill you. You’ll get to see trial. You’ll suffer. You’ll spend the rest of your days trapped in a two meter by two meter box, with a much smaller box to shit in, and that will be your life until the end of time.”

“Thank you for promising *not* to do something you have no power to do.”

“And while you’re rotting, we *will* track down the *real* Spectre—the source of all these goddamn clones—and we will absolutely end him. You might be a copy, but you feel pain. You feel anger. You don’t want to die.”

“Maybe,” said Spectre. “Although, you underestimate my resolve. No, I think I’ll just take these Chinese engines, go to Earth and open up a portal to a future timeline, and then my job will be complete. That’s all I was created to do… and that’s all my life’s purpose *is*. Why would I abandon it just because you ask me to? Or threaten me?”

Mattis stared blankly at the bulkhead. He had seen one such portal open before; the shockwave had destroyed most of the surrounding system, including a gas giant and all its attendant moons. Earth wouldn’t stand a chance. The moon wouldn’t stand a chance. All the ships in orbit wouldn’t stand a chance. “But if you destroy Earth,” he said through clenched teeth, “what will that do to your allies in the future? They won’t exist.”

“You’re assuming a lot about temporal mechanics,” said Spectre, evenly. “At least try to understand this: why would the Avenir send ships into the past if the past was immutable and could not be altered?”

Silence.

“Plus, I know something you don’t. Which I will tell you while I wait for these Chinese vermin to pull into a more favorable position for me to tear them apart. Without Earth, there will be no Avenir. At least, that faction

of the Avenir that have attempted to stop me. All that will remain in my timeline of choice will be … me. And my army. And those I rule. I know, because I've been there. My actions are … foreordained. This is destiny, Admiral."

More silence. Mattis couldn't believe his ears. The implausibility of it all. It was science fiction. But here he was, listening to the bad-guy monologue, having seen first-hand the atrocities of Spectre, the almost incomprehensible technology of the Avenir, and the existential threat to humanity that technology in the hands of Spectre posed.

"And now," said Spectre, triumphant. "You understand me. Goodbye, Mattis. The death of your Earth will fuel the resurrection of my own."

The line went dead. Mattis let his hand radio hand fall limp.

But one thought gave him just an edge of hope.

Spectre had goaded him. Mocked him. Insulted him. In the past, he had simply… been completely nonchalant towards Mattis and his general existence. That could only mean one thing.

This time, Spectre was worried.

"Well," said Spears, briskly, her anger and despondency resolved in the face of a clear enemy to confront. "I think we have a job to do. Take my ship back before Spectre uses it to blow up Earth."

"I'll stay with my brother, and Corrick," said Reardon. "Spectre will probably want to take the *Aerostar* if he can."

Probably. "Take care of your brother." Mattis mulled it over in his head. "Spectre isn't playing," he said. "Never is. He-she-whatever knows we'll do whatever we can to take the ship back. He'll be prepared no matter which way we go. Can't even imagine the kinds of shitty traps he's got lying in wait for us. And maybe even some of the crew, too. Who knows."

Spears fingered her radio. "I can have a tac-team of Royal Marines up there in forty seconds."

Something in his gut told him that wouldn't work. "Spectre knows what Blackwood knows, including how you're going to play the game. He'll have something ready for the Marines, I promise you."

"Okay," said Spears, nodding sharply. "So, what if we cut through the bulkheads? Using explosives, if need be? Bypass anything he could trap?"

"We don't know that that would work, and besides, he'd know we were coming because of all the blasts."

Spears looked around the room “So we can’t use anyone else. All right, what if we don’t make any radio calls and we sort it out ourselves? We don’t go through the ship’s passages. We go outside. Onto the outer hull.”

“But,” said Yim, scratching his head. “The bridge is right at the center of the ship. How can we get there from the outside?”

Spears tapped her nose. She looked angry, furious even, but was obviously suppressing it under a huge wave of tea-fueled resolve. “You let me worry about that. For now, let’s go fetch some space suits and prepare to take a walk. Doctor Manda, continue to test the crew before they can join—and that’s an order.” She scowled. “I would rather not have another crewman reveal themselves to be bloody Spectre while we’re out stomping around on the hull.”

“Hope this trip in the suit ends up better than my last one,” said Mattis.

For a brief moment there was a relaxed, pleasant moment as Spears chuckled, and then the General Quarters alarm once more rang throughout the ship.

Spectre had engaged the Chinese.

Chapter Fifty-Five

Port side external-access airlock
HMS Caernarvon
Empty space

Doctor Manda left to take care of Corrick. The pilot looked entirely exhausted—like she had been about to fall asleep, despite the serious situation.

Given her injuries, she could not help them. It was best she stay under proper medical supervision, which conveniently meant that the four suits typically found in the standard British airlock would mean they had one for everyone.

About time they had some good luck.

“Okay,” said Mattis, taking in a deep breath of recycled air as he stepped into the airlock. “Quick check in. Everyone ready?”

“Locked and pressurized,” said Spears. “I bypassed the decompression alarm. Spectre shouldn’t know we’re outside until it’s too late.”

“Ready to go,” said Blair. “Just tell me there won’t be any low gravity…”

“Prepare for disappointment,” said Yim. “There won’t be that much on the outer hull. A little. But keep your boots mag-locked.”

“Great,” said Blair, looking distinctly uncomfortable in her suit.

There was no time to worry about it. “Don’t puke in there,” said Mattis. “Serious now.”

“You got it, Mattis.” She gave two thumbs up in an admirable effort at confidence.

No more stalling. He reached over and hit the airlock cycle button. Air hissed out of the room, gauges on his suit slowly showed the pressure differential increasing. When all the air was gone, Mattis pushed the door to the outside of the ship open and stepped out onto the hull.

Into a massive firefight.

Six Chinese ships, sailing in a tight V, were firing silently in the depths of space, volleys of cannon fire striking the *Caernarvon*'s hull plates, each impact a bright flash and a burst of shrapnel. The burning wrecks of two more ships drifted aimlessly in space, raging infernos consuming them from within.

"Holy hell," said Mattis, staring in wonder as another wave of fire sailed in and splashed off the hull. "We should *not* be here." He closed the door. How had that single British ship done so much damage? Obviously, Spectre's mention of pushing buttons to destroy ships was no jest. Possibly more mutunt-in-a-box bombs. Like Lily had been, before Chuck befriended her.

"That's why this is the best idea for us," said Spears, her voice wavering uncharacteristically. "He won't be expecting us to go this way because nobody would be crazy enough to walk across the outer hull during a firefight."

"Okay," said Mattis. "Plan is, we need to get to the bridge. But it's at the center of the ship, so… Spears. What's the plan?"

"We need to get to the aft airlock. There's an emergency access passage that leads along the spine of the ship toward the CIC. It's there because the original design for the *Swallow* class ships, like the *Caernarvon*, had problems with their bridge computer systems shutting down due to thermal overloads. The solution was to have a vent installed to pump in extra atmosphere and help prevent the bridge crew from overheating. And while advances in computers fixed the thermal problems, the vents are still there. If Spectre knows about them or thinks we would be crazy enough to reach them, I'll eat my hat. With salt."

"Vents," said Mattis, skeptically. "How big are they?"

Spears smiled laconically. But Mattis could tell it was a fake smile, smothering pure anger. "Hope you haven't been putting on weight in your old age."

"Great," muttered Blair. "Claustrophobic spaces *and* zero gravity…"

"Pish posh, it'll be nothing," said Spears. "I'll be with you every step of the way." She paused, thinking for a moment. "But in order to get from the port airlock to the aft airlock, we're still going to have to run across the hull."

"For how long?" asked Mattis, doubtful. "You know there's a battle out there, right?"

“I most certainly do,” said Spears. “But at the distances we’re talking about—close enough for us to *see* the Chinese ships with our Mk I eyeballs—they aren’t going to be aiming for the center of mass. They’ll be hitting the weak points. Right, Yim?”

“That’s what I would do,” he said. “It makes sense.”

“Right. And the center of the ship is the easiest part to hit, but also the most heavily armored, apart from the bow. So it’s pretty unlikely they’ll be aiming there.”

“Might they be aiming, you know, *aft?*” asked Blair. “You know, where we’re running to?”

“We run starboard first,” said Spears. “Over the middle of the ship, then when we’re on the far side, down toward the airlock.”

“This is insane. Suicide.”

Spears straightened up to her full height and adjusted her suit smartly. “And that’s why it’s going to work—nobody expects it. It’s not suicide if we survive, and the best way for us to do that is to do something he simply will not see coming. They won’t expect us.”

“Fine,” said Mattis. If they were going to be unexpected… “Okay. Operation Spanish Inquisition is our best shot, so I’m going to open the door again. Ready?”

“Ready,” said everyone, simultaneously. Mattis pushed open the door, revealing the empty, endless space once more, and the raging firefight streaking across it. He double-checked his boots were magnetized, took a deep breath, and then flung himself out of the airlock onto the outer hull of the ship.

“Run!” he shouted, sprinting as fast as he could over the lip of the ship, toward the far side, hoping that this insane plan was just impossible enough to work.

Chapter Fifty-Six

Outer Hull
HMS Caernarvon
Empty Space

He could hear nothing but his own ragged breathing; could feel nothing more than the pumping of his legs and the pounding of his heart in his chest. For Mattis, the fear of being silently obliterated by a stray Chinese round was a powerful motivator.

If it happened, though, at least it would be quick.

No sound made it through the vacuum of space, and given that he was in front, Mattis had no idea how the others were faring. It was something he simply had no time to consider. Instead, he sprinted as fast as he could, bouncing on the outer hull, his magnetic boots latching hold every time they met the metal blow him, only to push off again immediately.

He felt like he was a giant on the surface of a tiny moon. The horizon of the tiny ship scrolled, sensors and damaged hull plates threatening to trip him with every step, but he kept his footing through a combination of luck and panic, arms and legs flying.

A round splashed into plating to his left, silently bursting in against the hull, passing a low vibration through the metal under his feet. The force was enough to make his chest shake. A cloud of sparks grew from the weapon impact, and vaporized hull plating was thrown up from the blast. It quickly engulfed him like a glowing swarm of bees, the buzzing shards of metal washing over him, stinging at his suit, tearing and biting and ripping and tearing—

But the suit held. Miraculously. Damn British engineering was better than he expected. An American suit would have been sliced into Swiss cheese by a blast like that. A piece of metal clanged off his helmet, sending twin cracks over the perspex that created additional, smaller cracks, like a fork of lighting across his vision. But it held.

He was, however, confident that the suit would not take another hit like that.

Speed. Speed. Mattis's breath came in ragged gasps, but he forced himself on, and soon the battle behind him retreated, the bright light of the firing Chinese fleet fading into the horizon. For a second—just a second—he thought they might make it.

The *Caernarvon*'s magnetic grappler flew out, seeking some target he could not see but could totally guess: the engines, presumably from a wrecked Chinese ship. Even a fully powered magnetic grappler had no hope to remove the engines from an intact vessel… he would have to be targeting the wrecks. Hopefully the blast had damaged its engines and rendered them useless. Hopefully—

One of the Chinese ships exploded, bursting into a billion flaming pieces. Flaming pieces that slowly, almost teasingly slow, began to float through space toward the *Caernarvon.* It seemed liked a snail's pace at Mattis's distance, but it must have been hundreds of meters a second in reality.

"Move!" Mattis howled, his voice coming out like a strangled cat. Shrapnel from armor-piercing weapon impacts was one thing, but this was hundreds of tons of metal being flung directly at them. Dense metal, heavy metal, moving fast. The AP round had thrown up a dangerous cloud of sparks, but this would do so much more. Ten times more. Fifty.

No suit could sustain that.

The wave drew closer and closer. Mattis's gloved hand grabbed hold of the aft airlock door, yanking it open. He flung himself inside, closely followed by Yim, then Blair.

"Spears?" he called. "Captain Spears, hurry!"

"We must close the door," said Yim, reaching for the handle.

Mattis swatted his hand away. "No! Not yet! She's still out there!"

And then Spears was through the door. She pulled it closed and yanking the handle to seal it.

A powerful, tremulous vibration washed over the ship, shaking their boots so hard it nearly pushed them off their feet. Blair crashed into Mattis, then Yim fell on top of her, and everyone was shaken around like a can of loose change, bashing against each other, against the walls and floor and roof as tons of red hot debris slammed into the *Caernarvon*, the force rattling everything.

Then, mercifully, it ended.

“Everyone okay?” Mattis panted. “Nobody hurt?”

“Yeah,” said Yim.

“I’m good,” said Spears.

“I threw up in my suit,” said Blair.

Mattis grimaced and reached out from the pile, awkwardly grabbing hold of the airlock cycle handle and pulling it. Air rushed in, filling up the tiny airlock as the four of them disentangled and, with considerable effort, pulled themselves up into a standing position.

“Well,” said Spears, unclipping her helmet and impatiently tearing it off. Her helmet had a huge, ominous crack along the front and a spiderweb mark where shrapnel had slammed into it. “That was fun.”

Blair similarly removed her helmet. Then she upended it and emptied her guts into the makeshift perspex bowl.

Poor kid.

“We ready?” he asked, drawing his pistol and pulling back the slide. “It’s time to go kill me another Spectre.”

“Sounds good,” said Spears, similarly drawing her weapon.

“And me,” said Yim.

Everyone looked expectantly at Blair, who coughed and bravely patted her pistol.

“That’s a yes,” said Mattis, pushing open the door that lead into the ship, letting his weapon lead the way.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Corridor near the ventilation shaft
HMS Caernarvon
Empty Space

Using his multitool, Mattis pried off the hatch leading to the ventilation shaft, his pistol-mounted flashlight shining down the depressingly tiny metal box. Without his suit he could barely fit through… maybe.

Now he understood why Spears had told them not to bring rifles. They simply wouldn't fit.

"Ladies first," said Mattis.

"Age before beauty," countered Spears.

With a groan, Mattis squirmed into the tube like a worm, crawling on his hands and knees, squirming through the narrow passage. It was tight going; he had to shove his shoulders forward, push with his knees, gain ground with a little wiggle, then lock his legs and shove his shoulders forward again. Shove, push, wiggle, lock, repeat. Behind him, the rest of the team repeated his motions, Yim right behind him, Blair next, followed by Spears. Blair seemed to be doing the best; her tall, slender frame giving her an edge in the narrow confines.

The shaft sloped downward, in toward the core of the ship, which compounded the claustrophobia; it was a mixture of getting stuck and of slipping and sliding forward into the ship, smashing against the bottom, and dying.

"You know," said Spears, "Spectre said he didn't care about you, right? But then he pulled off this complicated, extremely convoluted plan, all to get his hands on the Chinese engines." She grunted as she shifted forward. "There's some part of me that thinks that, out of all the rubbish he's ever slung, that's the worst. He has agents in the Chinese military, according to Admiral Yim, so surely there must have been an easier way to get what he

wanted. But he truly wanted to get you as well. It was personal, I'll wager. And he isn't above killing two birds with one stone."

"Well," said Mattis, "this bird doesn't want to be killed, with a hunk of rock or otherwise."

Spears chuckled lightly as she continued to drag herself through the passage, huffing and puffing. "You're probably right. Spectre is getting a little sick of losing. I think this is as personal for him as it is for me."

Spears said nothing, and neither did anyone else as they strained and shifted forward.

Minutes passed, broken only by the repeated shuffling along the tight vent and the shudder of weapons impacts rocking the ship. Ominously, the sounds grew less and less frequent, until the only noises were the faint hum of outgoing shells. And then nothing.

"Not good," muttered Spears from the rear. "Blasted arse would only stop shooting if he was out of targets… that must mean those ships are gone. I'm sorry, Yim."

"They tried to arrest me," said Yim dully. "It's okay."

Mattis knew he would not feel the same way if the situation was reversed, but he said nothing. There was nothing that could be said that would make it okay.

A faint tremor spread throughout the ship, like a second-long aftershock, then it faded away into nothing.

"Spears?" asked Mattis. "What was that?"

"We just entered Z-space," she said. "The old girl always shudders a bit, but you can only feel it near the outer hull."

Damn. "Looks like Spectre got what he wanted."

"Looks like," she said, grimly. But there was nothing for them to do but press on.

Time ticked away. Kinks in the shaft slowed them down enormously, and twice Mattis encountered large fans which he removed and passed back down the chain. So much lost time… how long had they been crawling? It felt like an eternity.

"We should be coming up on the vent soon," said Spears, dropping her voice to a hush. Mattis could barely hear her from the front. "Good thing too, my arms are getting mighty tired."

Mattis was anxious to escape the stale air in the vent and the smell of four sweaty bodies jammed into one narrow square pipe. But body odor was

a big part of the job, and nothing could top what he had survived in basic training. He continued the endless process—shove, push, wiggle, lock—and then he saw it.

The vent. A thin series of slits in the metal floor, long and covered by three fans, which were covered in cobwebs. Spears was right; this system hadn't been used in some time. From below, he could hear the faint whirring of computer systems and the chirping of bridge alarms.

Mattis risked a peek into the vent but couldn't see anyone. The command chair was empty, the bridge crew slumped over their consoles, bloody flowers boomed on their backs. "Looks clear," he whispered.

Yim gave an *OK* symbol, then moved his hand down, as though he was patting the ground. A signal to descend.

No kidding, but I can barely see anything…

Slowly, carefully, Mattis used his multitool to unscrew the fans, each fan secured by four screws. Each turn made a soft *squeak* that, he feared, would doom them all. But he kept at it, turning and turning until the first screw came out. Then the second. Then the third. Then the fourth. He put them aside carefully, cut the wires of the fan, and handed it back to Yim.

Two more to go. Mattis cautiously unscrewed them, similarly handing the dusty things back to Yim. Then only the grate itself remained.

Right as he went to lift it out, he accidentally knocked an overlooked screw off the edge and down into the bridge. It clattered to the deck, ringing loudly as it bounced and tumbled, rolling under a chair.

"Shit," he whispered.

A burst of gunfire sprayed into the ceiling, rounds splashing against the roof, one zipping just inches away from his elbow. Spears shouted out in pain and he knew that they couldn't stay here.

Mattis jammed his pistol down the hole and fired wildly, blindly, dumping his magazine. The rounds screamed and bounced inside the bridge, slamming into computers and chairs and consoles. The gunfire below continued, then abruptly stopped. With whoever was in there suppressed, or hopefully dead, he threw his pistol in and then wiggled toward the vent, plunging in head first. He swung himself in using the lip, landing awkwardly on his feet.

He suddenly wished he hadn't thrown his gun away, but he couldn't see Blackwood-Spectre anywhere. Nor the source of the gunfire. Nothing but the dead bridge crew.

Then he saw it. A submachine gun on a tripod right at the rear of the bridge, rigged to a microphone and thermal camera. It tracked him even now, its trigger depressed but ammunition expended.

He ran over and shoved the thing over. “Clear! There was a turret. It’s safe now.”

Yim hopped down landing heavily and joining him. Then Blair.

“Spears?” asked Mattis, looking anxiously to the opening in the vent. “Captain?” The ceiling was littered with bullet holes where the turret had sprayed down the roof.

Bullet holes dripping blood.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
Z-space

"Yim," Mattis croaked, his heart in his throat. "Gimme a boost up. We gotta get her out of there."

Yim did so, hooking his fingers together and crouching. "Go."

Mattis climbed up into the offered hand, reaching up and grabbing the lip of the vent, pulling himself upward. Spears lay in the shaft, slumped forward, a thin line of blood running down from her body toward a bullet hole.

Shit. This was bad. Mattis hopped up into the vent, crawling forward. "Spears? Spears, you okay?"

"Fine," she said, the words weak and coming through clenched teeth. "Just… a spot of bother is all." She extended her hand. "Be a good chap and help me down, will you?"

He took her hand, squirming backward, pulling her toward the hole in the floor above the bridge. "This way," he said gently. He turned and called over his shoulder. "Blair! Get a corpsman up here!"

"But I thought it wasn't safe," said Blair.

"Just do it!" He tugged Spears back until he was able to drop back down onto the bridge, stepping into Yim's hands and then, slowly, carefully, lowering Spears down to the deck. She'd been hit twice, once in the arm, which shouldn't be too serious, and once in the left side of her chest.

"Ouch," said Spears, grimacing visibly. "Nasty stuff."

"Don't worry about it," said Mattis, pressing his hands to her wounds. He cracked a smile. "Looks like you finally earned yourself some leave, Captain. Don't worry. You'll be sipping margaritas on a beach pretty soon, getting fawned over by tanned cabana boys and soaking up the sun. Come to think of it, I think you're faking it."

Spears's breathing was shallow, her voice faint. "Mmm, cabana boys," she said.

"We've got a corpsman on the way," said Yim. "Just hold tight."

"Belay that," said Spears, shaking her head, suddenly becoming more alert. "We can't—we can't risk it."

Mattis applied more pressure to her wounds. "Yeah, yeah. We already knew that. Turns out we *can* risk it. Especially if *it's* the Captain. Don't worry, Blair told them to go nice and slow."

"You're a good man, Admiral," she said, her voice weakening again.

"If I'm an Admiral again," he said, "I'm officially ordering you not to die. And I know what you Brits are like… you love following orders."

"Captain is always in charge on her own ship," Spears said faintly. "You can't fool me with your white lies, Jack."

He said nothing, simply keeping his hands on her injuries. "Where's that corpsman?"

"They're coming," said Blair. "It looks like Blackwood—I mean, Spectre—welded some of the internal doors shut. Medics are cutting through them, but it's taking time."

Shit. Those doors were designed to withstand battle damage and explosive decompressions. They were not going to be able to get through them in a hurry.

Spears grabbed hold of the collar of Mattis's suit, gently pulling his face close to hers. Her breathing was shallow, but her voice was full of fire. "Mattis," she said, and he could *feel* the palpable anger in her voice. "Make sure you kill that coward for me. Spectre. Not just this clone, not just this army of fakes. *Him*. Kill him. Send his carcass to Hell; I want to welcome him personally."

He couldn't do anything but nod. "I will," he promised. "I'll get him for you."

"Very good," whispered Spears. Blood ran from the side of her mouth. "Mattis. Mattis, listen, I think Captain Flint had nanobots in his brain, just like… just like Corrick." She pulled his collar closer, her voice weak and horse. "I think… other officers in the fleet have them too. So that at the right… moment… they turn."

"What are you saying?" asked Mattis. "Who has them?"

"Admiral Chang of Goalkeeper. Goalkeeper… and others. The Reardon's computer from the *Stennis* has… *might* have… a list.

Information. Something to help you… beat him."

"I'll look inside," said Mattis. "As soon as we get out of this shitshow. I promise."

"Good." Spears let go of his collar, her hand falling limp to the deck. She smiled. "To be honest, I never imagined dying in an air vent, bettered by a robot."

Mattis looked around. "Looks like you're on the bridge to me." He smiled, his eyes wet.

"Excellent," she said, and then closed her eyes. And then she was gone.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
Z-space

A grim quiet fell over the bridge. Mattis checked her pulse. Checked her heart.

"I'm sorry," said Yim. "She's gone."

Spears had died. Died… for what? For access to Reardon's computer? For the data on it? The injustice of it stung. She'd died for *bits*. For *zeroes and ones*.

Was it worth dying for?

He felt helpless, and that made him furious. With a frustrated growl, Mattis pulled himself to his feet. "Okay," he said. Spectre in all his various iterations had taken so much from him already, what was one more life? "Let's find that shit stain, blast him to Hell, and then… you know what? I've got nothing better to do. Let's go hunt down every single Spectre clone in the universe. Seems like it might be fun."

"Sounds good to me," said Yim, standing as well. "Blair, tell the corpsman there's no need to hurry. Take their time. Be cautious. Who knows what other traps Spectre's left about."

While Blair went to work out how to communicate with the corpsman, Mattis walked over to the intercom and touched the key. "Attention all hands," he said. "This is the Bridge. I am Captain Jack Mattis of the United States Navy. Captain Spears is dead. Commander Blackwood is…" he didn't have a simple way of explaining what had happened, so he gave them just the bare essentials. "Responsible for her death. I can't order you to arrest her. But if you see her, be wary. She is not who she appears. Break." He took his hand off the talk key, thinking, then pressed it again. "I will be assuming command of this vessel until we can return to Earth and be relived. I understand having your CO and XO replaced by foreign

command is jarring; I hope that many of you will know my voice and also know my reputation, and that you will stand by me nevertheless. Captain Spears vouched for me. She had a plan, a mission, and I intend to follow through with it. I need every one of you to keep calm and carry on. Any objections can be noted with your direct superior. Remain at your posts, and be advised that we may soon be engaging unknown hostile targets, so stay alert. That is all."

Dammit…

He looked down at Spears. She looked so calm. So peaceful. The epitome of a calm, quiet, British death; dignified and composed to the last.

"Special Agent Blair, secure this bridge. Make sure the bodies are arranged respectfully, and presented to the corpsman when they arrive."

"Okay," said Blair. She muttered to herself. "I'll figure it out."

"Admiral Yim," he said, "I want control of this ship immediately."

He seemed doubtful. "Not sure that little speech will convince the crew," he said. "They don't know what's happened here."

"Julius Caesar once said, *It is easier to find men who will volunteer to die, than to find those who are willing to endure pain with patience*. Spears was a great CO. One of the best I've known. Those kind of people inspire loyalty, and I suspect this crew will want to honor her memory." Mattis would have to deal with any objections if and when they arose. "Besides. Americans and Brits are friends. We'll be fine."

"If you say so," said Yim, and moved over to Blackwood's old console. He touched the screen, checking the ship's systems.

"How's she looking?"

"We're on autopilot," he said. "It looks like Spectre had an exit destination already programed in. We're moving…" he stopped, frowning. "Much faster than we should be. Looks like Spectre played games with the engines, too. Not sure exactly what they've done, but we're coming up on the exit point real soon." He stared. "Which is *Earth*."

They should have been hours or days away from anywhere of note, let alone Earth. More ominously, if Spectre had plotted that course, and that course was Earth, then…. There was no reason Spectre would want to go there that would be good news.

"Pull us out of Z-space," he said. "Execute an emergency translation."

Yim's reluctance was obvious. "We could end up anywhere," he said cautiously. "We could damage the engine and end up months away from

anywhere… or inside a planet—or a star."

Mattis knew that as well as anyone, but he also knew that they were out of options. "Do it," he said, settling into the command chair. "Because, no matter what, we can't let Spectre bring this ship to Earth—"

An alarm chimed throughout the bridge, signaling the disengagement of the autopilot. "We're exiting Z-space," said Yim, his tone charged.

"That was quick," said Mattis, twisting in the chair.

"I didn't do it," said Yim, holding up his hands. "It's the autopilot. And it's arrived."

With a shudder, the *Caernarvon* shifted out of Z-space, the multicolored hues of the strange unreality disappearing, real space fading back into view on every monitor. A real space surrounded by ships, satellites, space stations and Goalkeeper—a whole civilization's worth of traffic.

And right at the heart of it all, a giant blue-green marble floated in space, the homeworld of his species, the cradle of civilization.

Earth.

Chapter Sixty

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
High Earth Orbit

Mattis stared at the image of Earth on the main monitor. The sun was rising over Eastern Russia, Japan and Australia, bathing the whole Pacific Ocean in light.

"We're being hailed," said Yim, tapping on the XO's console.

"By whom?"

"Everyone." Yim scrolled through the incoming radio connections. "Space stations, surface observatories, ships in orbit, Goalkeeper… seems like word of our little incident on Chrysalis has arrived even faster than we did."

"And they probably couldn't contact us in Z-space because of the engine modifications," Mattis mused. "Well, first, we haven't found Spectre yet. So everyone else is going to have to wait." He turned to Blair. "I could use some help here. I don't suppose you know how to use any of this equipment?"

Blair stared at him. "No," she said. "I'm a federal investigator. I don't know to use sensitive military hardware."

"Do you know how to use a radio?"

She stood up straight. "I'm a *federal investigator.* We have radios."

"Right," said Mattis, pointing to the communications officer's chair. "Just don't press any buttons that look like they shoot anything."

Blair she sat in the chair belligerently, but began to stare in bewilderment once she took in the array of controls before her. She put on a headset, ignoring the blood with professional dignity, and then touched a screen. "Hello? Yes, this is the *Caernarvon*…"

Mattis would have to turn her loose and see what she could do. With Yim his only company with any experience on a bridge, things would be

difficult.

"Jack," Yim said, pointing to one of the far monitors, which was lit up and flashing a yellow warning. "Look."

An unauthorized shuttle launch had been detected from the hangar bay. There were no prizes given for determining who that would be. Yim tapped a key and the main monitor lit up, showing a standard issue British shuttle tearing away from the *Caernarvon*, the scorched and heavily damaged engine core of a much larger ship clumsily chained to its roof. How the engine core had survived the explosion of its ship he had no idea, nor any idea how the *Caernarvon* had so easily defeated five equally-matched Chinese warships. Evermore, the haunting words drifted back into his mind. *Spectre was full of surprises*.

"Target that shuttle," said Mattis, scowling darkly at the screen. "All guns. Missiles. Whatever you got, whatever you can get access to."

"And blow it to Hell?" asked Yim.

"And blow it to Hell."

Yim tapped at keys hesitantly, unfamiliar with the British systems, but after a few seconds, he nodded emphatically. "Okay. I think I have it locked up."

"Hey, Mattis?" asked Blair, touching her ear. "Goalkeeper is trying to talk to you. They say it's urgent."

"Tell them to stand by," he said, and then nodded to Yim. "Fire."

Yim put in the command, but nothing happened. He reiterated. Nothing. Then a message flashed up on the screen.

"Gun crews are refusing to fire," said Yim, his tone suddenly infused with a combination of fear, anger, and resignation. "They say they've ID'd the shuttle as a British asset, and its IFF checks out. They won't shoot one of their own ships if they think it has a valid ID."

"That's because it is their own ship," said Mattis, grinding his teeth. "And because it *does* have a friendly ID. Because it's Blackwood's ID code, and it's Spectre using it."

Yim thumped his fist on the keyboard. "I know, but they still won't fire."

There was no time to debate with the gun crews about the issue. "Lock them up with missiles, then," he said. "Short range, long range, I don't care. It's a transport. It doesn't have armor. Whatever we have. If it goes boom, hit them with it."

“Missiles are locked out,” said Yim, frustration rising in his voice. “The gun crews instituted an emergency shutdown of everything. They want to talk to you.”

“Mattis,” said Blair, “Goalkeeper *really* wants to talk to you.”

Everyone wanted an explanation from him, but all he could see was that ship, that shuttle, racing toward Earth with its stolen Chinese engine strapped to its back.

Mattis knew what it was after. He’d seen it before. It was going to use the mass of Earth to open a portal to the future. It would in all likelihood completely destroy the Earth.

And there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Chapter Sixty-One

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
High Earth Orbit

Dammit. God*dammit*. Mattis watched the shuttle move farther and farther away—zooming toward Earth—flying in a straight line, unafraid. With his bridge crew down, surrounded by unfamiliar systems and with only a federal agent and Yim for help, Mattis had no idea what was happening around him. Was the shuttle communicating with anyone? Spectre spinning his lies, buying time?

"Ram it," said Mattis, desperation growing in his gut. "We're a British warship. They're a tiny *transport vehicle*, for God's sake. Catch up with them and just *crush* them. Anything to stop them doing what we all know they're about to do."

Yim tapped a few keys, then, with a sigh, pushed back his keyboard. "Engines are locked out too."

They didn't have guns, they didn't have missiles, they didn't have engines. There had to be *some* way to stop that shuttle. There had to be some way…

"Mattis, listen!" Blair shouted. "They say they're going to fire. They sound really serious, Jack."

That took him out of his thoughts. "*Who's* going to fire?"

"Goalkeeper," she said. "Apparently they *really* want to talk to you, or they're going to shoot something called *Little Friend*."

Oh shit. The giant gun that had blown up an Avenir ship in a single shot. And commanded by someone Spears was convinced had nanobots in his brain. "Okay, put me through," Mattis grumbled.

"Uhh, how do I do that?"

Goddammit. "Uhh…" he jabbed a finger at her console. "That flashing red button right there. No—No—Yes. That one. Press it."

She did.

"—is Admiral Chang, and this is your final warning, *Caernarvon*. I say again, we *will* fire on you if you do not positively identify yourself."

"This is Captain Mattis," he barked. Nanobots or not, he needed Chang. "Admiral Chang, cease fire."

For a moment he thought they couldn't hear him—was he was on mute? He gave an exasperated sigh and went to replace Blair at the console—but then Chang spoke up. "Mattis? Captain Jack Mattis?"

"Last time I checked," he said, settling back into his chair and shooting Blair an apologetic half-nod. "Listen, I don't have time to chat with you. You see that shuttle there?"

"Of course," said Chang, "and there's one Commander Blackwood aboard, and she says you've taken command of her ship and the bridge crew are dead. Is this accurate?"

"She's trying to stall you," he said, bluntly. "See that engine core on the back of her shuttle? That's a special Chinese engine from a ship, she blew it up and stole it. She's going to use that to open a portal to the future, because she's a clone of Spectre, and—"

"Slow down," said Chang, his voice quickly hardening into threatening. "I want to speak to Captain Spears."

Mattis's eyes flicked briefly to Spears's peaceful face, then swallowed hard. "You can't. Blackwood put a bullet in her."

"Commander Blackwood said," said Chang, "that you were threatening to kill her. That she had to flee the bridge when you and a small number of mutineers stormed it and—"

"She's *lying*," shouted Mattis, his fingernails scraping across the armrest of the command chair. "Don't you get it? Spectre is about to win. He's about to *destroy Earth*, and you're just sitting here arguing about nonsense."

Chang's voice suddenly leveled, as though he had made some kind of difficult decision. "Captain Mattis, we have received communications from the crew of the *Caernarvon* which suggest that you are acting against their interests and issuing commands that the crew are refusing to follow—that you are following an alleged secret plan Spears had, but of which the crew was never informed. Those reports are corroborated by the testimony of Commander Blackwood. Accordingly, this is a mess and we are going to sort it out. You are to prepare to be boarded and to submit to my Marines when they come aboard. Any *Caernarvon* crew members who are listening

to this transmission are ordered to cooperate with the boarding parties and stand against Captain Mattis. And Captain?" Chang's voice softened slightly, but was full of deadly promise. "Do not test me. No tricks. If needed, I will end you."

Mattis had seen the impact of Chang's weapon first hand. There was no way they could survive even a single effective shot.

He did the only thing he could think of at the moment. "I'm pleading with you," he said. "I'm not lying. I've never lied, not to you, not to anyone. Think! Don't you remember that my face was all over the news? Do you not remember the Battle for Earth, or Friendship Station? The People's Republic fought alongside me against the Avenir. President Schuyler believed me. Admiral Fischer believed me—"

"And look what happened to *her* fleet," said Chang. Still, Mattis could sense a crack there. He was getting through.

"There are *thousands* of witnesses, and *irrefutable proof* that what I've been saying this whole time is right," Mattis said. "And I'm asking you now. I'm telling you. That's not Blackwood. That's Spectre."

A long, agonizingly quiet pause.

"I'm sorry," said Chang. "I can't take the risk."

There must be something they could do, some option, some way to stop Spectre. Was it the nanobots, or… was Chang simply coming to a perfectly natural conclusion?

Did it matter?

"Come on," said Mattis, dropping absolutely any pretense of composure. His voice warbled. "This is your homeworld too."

"Actually," said Chang, a telltale shift in his voice. One Mattis had been expecting. "Earth stopped being my home long ago." His voice sounded like recordings of Corrick during her fugue states.

He was one of them too. Spears had been right to be afraid.

"Options," demanded Mattis. "I could really use a hand here."

Yim shrugged stiffly. "Beg more?"

Blair stammered slightly. "I-I don't know, Mattis, I'm sorry."

All he could do was watch as Spectre flew farther away from him, his enemy slipping past Goalkeeper's defensive net in the *Caernarvon*'s own shuttle.

And then a voice came over the line, one he hadn't heard in what seemed like a lifetime. A very Texan voice.

“This is Captain Stewart Lynch of the USS *William Harrison*. Captain Mattis, I heard you’re in a mighty tight bind there and could use some help.”

Chapter Sixty-Two

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
High Earth Orbit

"Lynch?" Mattis stared incredulously. Last he heard, Lynch was in a coma and was uncertain to even recover. "Is that really you?"

"In the flesh, more or less. I've got a helluva story for you when we're done here." He could practically hear Lynch smile over the line. "Now, what can I do ya for?"

A powerful energy flooded Mattis, a flash of hope flickering in the dark. "Okay, Lynch? You're our last hope. You see that shuttle?"

"Aye, I do."

"That's Spectre aboard there." Mattis tried to get out the words as fast as they would come. "He killed Captain Spears, and he stole a Chinese engine. If he opens another portal, dammit, it'll be just like the Pinegar System all over again. You remember that big gas giant, Lyx?"

Lynch's tone immediately lost its joviality. "How could I forget watching a whole planet get chomped to bits and turned into a damn rift to the future?"

"It's the same here," said Mattis, pointing at the ship on the main monitor, even though Lynch couldn't possibly see the gesture. "He's about to do it again, but with *Earth*. You saw what it did to a huge gas giant—you know what it'll do to Earth. You have to stop him. Blast that bastard into atoms. You gotta shoot him down before he gets close enough."

Mattis knew he sounded desperate. Because he was desperate. He didn't even know the range on that thing. It could already be too late.

"You know I trust you, Mattis," he said, without a hint of hesitation. "I'm locking it up now. Going to give that little bastard a full spread from all guns, and then we'll take a week's leave together and pick up the

pieces.” Lynch chuckled grimly. “And maybe get in some fly fishing time. The world still thinks I’m in a coma, so we got all the time in the world—”

“—Just shoot him, for God’s sake!” Blair blurted.

“I’m on it—guns are spinning up. These little frigates, they take a while to load.”

Every second was precious. Every second that tiny dot, the shuttle, inched closer to Earth.

“I’m detecting a big power buildup from that shuttle,” said Yim, anxious. “Holy shit, I think he’s about to do it.”

Admiral Chang’s voice cut in over the line. “Captain Lynch, belay Captain Mattis’s suggestions. I am ordering you to *stand down*. Do *not* engage that shuttle. It has been positively identified to be carrying a British Naval Commander, Commander Jemima Blackwood, and I’ve *personally* spoken to her and *personally* verified that it is her. I say again: stand down and hold your fire, or you, yourself, will be fired upon.”

“She’s like Jeremy Pitt,” Mattis said hurriedly. “You remember—a clone. A copy. And either Chang is too, or he’s being controlled through nanobots. It’s complicated, but I can explain everything if you *just shoot him*.”

“Going to be honest with you, Captain,” said Lynch, hesitating, “you’re making it real hard for me to pull the trigger here. He’s controlled by *nanobots*? *And* he’s a clone? And he’s a she?”

“I’ll explain later,” Mattis said, doing his level best to avoid shouting again. “Lynch, listen to me. Just listen. That’s Spectre. I promise you. I promise you I’ll show you the evidence later, but for now I just *need* you to trust me. Trust me or it’s over for all of us.”

“Stand down, Captain Lynch,” said Chang, his tone threatening. “Don’t make me kill you like I did the crew of this space station.”

The briefest pause filled the radio. And then…

“Well that just made the damn decision a lot easier.” Lynch paused for effect. “Gun crews, fire.”

A wave of gunfire flew in from off-camera, two of the shells striking the transport. One skipped of the underside of the hull, while another round hit it squarely in one of the engines.

“The buildup is continuing,” said Yim. “It’s off the *charts*. How is that tiny shuttle providing so much energy? It’s not possible!”

“Goodbye, Mattis,” said Spectre. “You lose.”

A flash of blue light washed out the screen. Mattis had seen this exact same sight before, and he could do nothing but watch in abject horror as the light bathed the surface of the Earth in an azure glow.

For a second, nothing happened. The blue light hung, suspended, dazzling their unbelieving eyes. Perhaps the power of the shuttle had been insufficient; perhaps the damage Lynch had done to it had been enough to disable whatever effect Spectre was trying to utilize.

The glow intensified, the *Caernarvon*'s screens slowly filtering it out as it grew. The light solidified, becoming hundreds of tendrils of energy that, with startling speed, wrapped themselves around the planet, clutching it like the hand of a titan.

And then it began to squeeze.

The energy involved must have been immense. There was nothing left of the shuttle at all; the strange technology must have turned its entire mass to energy, then used said energy as fuel for Earth's dismemberment. The continents cracked; Australia lifted up in front of his eyes, then dropped back down, the ripple of the shockwave spreading out into the ocean, creating a vast tsunami that must have been terrifying to witness on the ground; Mattis could *see it from orbit*. Just as had happened to Zenith, just as he had seen on Lyx, the Earth crumpled and imploded like a piece of paper scrunched up by giant hands. An impossible, horrible force compacted it, the crust cracking, boiling lava meeting the oceans in colossal waves of steam that must have been supersonic or faster.

In moments, the Earth was nothing but a white hot ball of compacted matter that, trembling as though in fear, winked out of existence and became a glowing blue portal, a two dimensional oval hovering in space.

Nobody said anything. Nobody *could* say anything.

Spectre could have used any planet he wanted to for this, but had chosen Earth. He could have done it to an abandoned, uncharted rock out in the far edges of the galaxy.

But he hadn't. He'd chosen Earth… and brought Mattis right to the main event, the extinction of his homeworld, just so Spectre could make him watch.

Debris expanded, broken chucks of planet drifting outward in an ever-expanding sphere. Chang's voice drifted back through the line. "Ta-ta," he said, and on Mattis's command screen, he saw the command module of Goalkeeper flash bright white and explode.

Leaving nobody to even be angry at.

"My God," said Mattis, slumping into his chair, just staring slack-jawed at the place where Earth had just been. "I… God. Oh *God*."

"We just lost," Yim said with a small whimper. "We just lost *everything*."

Chapter Sixty-Three

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
The Ruins of Earth

Having ringside seats to the annihilation of thirteen billion people in twenty seconds wasn't something Mattis was mentally prepared to handle.

"Lord have mercy," whispered Lynch. "No, no… no!"

Mattis had nothing. He had no guns. No weapons at all. Not even any engines…

"What should we do?" asked Yim.

Do? There was nothing left *to* do. Nothing but to sit there and watch the portal slowly spin, its blue light flickering. Twinkling like a star.

"Mattis?"

He let out his long-held breath. There was no answer that would satisfy. There was nothing he could say.

"Mattis?" Yim's voice became insistent. "We have to do *something*. There are people on that planet—"

"They are gone," said Mattis, his heart lodged in his throat. "Your family is gone. My—my world is gone. Martha—" he shuddered, and shook himself violently to regain composure. "Everyone is gone. And so are we. There's nothing we can do."

The portal continued to expand, and a shudder ran through the *Caernarvon*. The creation of the portal required a huge expenditure of energy used to create a gravity distortion so large and so powerful that it could rip a hole in time itself.

"Oh God," said Blair, her hands over her mouth. "We're getting pulled in."

They were. And he could not give a single shit about what was about to happen to him.

“Goalkeeper,” said Mattis, his mouth dry and his lips chafed. “Listen, that portal—that portal is a gateway to the future. It’s a portal to a different timeline, and through that timeline a lot of very bad people are going to arrive. I need you to destroy them as they do, okay? It’s the only time they’ll be vulnerable. They have to come out one at a time, which means you just keep shooting. Right?”

Silence and static, punctured only by Blair’s muffled sobs, her head buried in her arms. But Mattis could just make out faint breathing on the other end of the line.

“Lynch? I know you can hear me. You gotta do this. Okay?”

“It’s gone,” said Lynch simply. “Earth is gone.”

This was not the time to lose it. “I understand,” said Mattis, firmly. “But now hear this: there are billions of people out there in the colonized systems who *need us*. With Earth gone—” he choked. Even saying the phrase was difficult. It felt surreal. Like he was sinking, like he was on the border between sleep and wakefulness, or falling into a complex partial seizure. But he knew it was real. “With Earth gone, those people won’t stand a chance. We need to stop these bastards here and now because this is the only place they *can* be stopped. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” said Lynch, his voice hollow and faint. “Y-you got it, Admiral. All guns, ready to shoot anything that comes through that portal.”

The *Caernarvon* drifted closer to the portal. With no engines, it was a slave to the sudden, intense gravitational pull the Avenir technology had created from the Chinese drives.

Mattis could have tried to get the engineers in propulsion back on his side. He could have begged and threatened and bargained, but he was just so… tired. The *Caernarvon* spun slowly toward the portal, drifting toward it like soap suds down the sink, and no part of him really wanted to resist at all. With Earth gone, everyone gone, what point was there in fighting the inevitable?

“Captain,” said Lynch, suddenly. “Are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

“Lynch, to be perfectly honest with you, my bridge crew is dead and although Blair and Yim are doing their best, we’re flying blind here. I’m not seeing anything.”

“Nothing’s coming out.”

Mattis couldn’t help but chuckle sardonically. “Maybe they’re having champagne before they decide to pay us a visit?”

“The portal,” said Lynch. “We hit the shuttle right before it activated. What if…” he considered. “When the Pinegar system exploded, there was a massive shockwave, one that destroyed the gas giant in the system and all its moons. But there’s no shockwave. The portal looks stable. Maybe this portal… it goes the other way?”

The other way? “What the hell are you talking about?”

“The portal’s orientation,” said a familiar voice. Modi. Modi was there too? Now *that* almost made him smile. “The gravitational wave is directional. It has to be precisely aligned to a local central gravitational point in order to select the rough time period that the portal will open to, and if the ship was struck and something thrown out of whack, then its possible that its alignment was disrupted. It might be this isn’t a portal *from* the future, it’s a portal *to* the future.”

Mattis watched the portal drifting closer and closer, its wide aperture threatening to swallow his ship whole. “Either way, it’s sucking us in, and —” God, he felt so tired. So empty and hollow and spent. “And even if you’re right, and we go through that thing and we end up *s*omewhere or some-*when*, there will be ships on the other side. So they’ll just destroy us. Right?”

“It’s only *roughly* in the same time,” said Modi. “With some luck, you might arrive before any hypothetical fleet assembles, or after they’ve already departed. In theory.”

That was the key word, wasn’t it. Luck. Modi’s idea was just pure theory—absolute guesswork.

“Okay,” said Mattis. It was all he could manage.

“Don’t fret, Captain,” said Lynch, resolution creeping bravely back into his voice, his Texan accent coming through stronger. “I ain’t going to let you get sucked into that thing alone. We’ll be right behind you, don’t you worry. We’ll help you secure whatever’s on the other side.”

“Best not,” said Mattis. “Goalkeeper might need you on this side, and honestly, Lynch, there might not *be* anything on the other side. Including us. Because in my experience, damaged pieces of technology just malfunction or explode.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re a Captain now, and I’m a Captain now, so we are doing this.”

Although he was genuinely touched, Mattis couldn’t stomach the idea that Lynch might follow him to his death, especially not so soon after

hearing his voice again. “Don’t,” he said softly.

“I’d follow you to Hell itself,” Lynch said. “We’ll be right behind you.”

“To Hell itself,” echoed Modi. “Or any other theoretical afterlife, not that there is any evidence of any religion’s post-death experience being supported by scientific consensus—”

“Shhh!” Lynch hissed, and they heard a distinct *smack.* “You goddamn robot, you ruin everything, you know that? Even getting sucked in a giant-ass portal to our deaths. Somehow you managed to ruin *that too*.”

Despite it all, despite the incoming portal which would either catapult them forward into an uncertain fate in the future or completely obliterate them, despite the unthinkable destruction of Earth, and the deaths of his son-in-law, his grandson, Martha … everyone he knew … Mattis laughed.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said. “Both of you.”

“And you too,” said Lynch, with equal sincerity. “And hey, we got a nice little present for you in the state room.”

Present? He had no idea. “I… guess.”

“You are most welcome, Captain.”

The *Caernarvon* started to list to port as the gravitational forces drew it inexorably closer to the portal. Off to the ship’s starboard, the USS *William Harrison* pulled in beside them, sailing down toward the portal alongside his ship.

Maybe this could work.

“I think you just might have a good idea,” said Mattis evenly, leaning forward and steepling his fingers. “Okay. Okay. You know what? To hell with it. Let’s do this. Let’s go make the mothers in the future tuck their children into bed, hushing them and saying, *No need to be scared, little one. There’s no such thing as an Admiral Jack Mattis.*”

Admiral. He had said it.

Lynch laughed loudly. “Sure. There’s nothing left for us in this timeline, anyway.”

It was true. He had to admit that entering the portal would almost certainly kill them, but he didn’t really care. He’d lost everything, every*one*, so a swift, explosive death was all he could hope for. So he would either expire, quickly and painlessly, or—

—Or actually go to the future.

The idea teased him with its potency. The Avenir had originated there. The weapons and technology humanity would develop in the future were …

potent, and he'd experienced them first-hand. And if the Avenir were truly hunting Spectre, trying to kill him just as Mattis was, then it made sense to find common cause.

They needed an edge—they needed the weapons and technology and the ability to strike at their enemies.

"You know," Mattis said,. "The court-martial said I couldn't command a US warship again, but I'm pretty sure even the US Navy doesn't have jurisdiction on future timelines."

"Aye aye," said Yim, smiling grimly. "Rock and roll."

Spectre had taken out Earth, but Mattis was determined, suddenly, that the act would not be their last strike against humanity.

Mattis smiled. He smiled right as the *Caernarvon* disappeared into the portal, the bright wave of energy swallowing them whole; a flash of light, a burst of energy that washed out their instruments and overloaded everything that could be plugged in…

And then he was gone from the universe.

And appeared in another one entirely.

Chapter Sixty-Four

Bridge
HMS Caernarvon
Unknown Place, Unknown Time

The bright blue light washed over everything, blinding Mattis with its glare, causing him to squint and then finally close his eyes.

Maybe this was what dying was like.

Slowly the light faded, and Mattis dared to open his eyes.

The *Caernarvon* and the *William Harrison* had appeared in an empty part of space, surrounded by a blanket of stars.

And debris. The broken, shattered hulls of starships lay all around them, hundreds of them or more, their hulls broken and cracked, empty and cold; dead and lifeless.

"What the…"

"No idea," said Yim, staring at the screen with him. "Looks like a fleet's graveyard. Maybe there's something out there we can salvage. Boost up the *Caernarvon* and the *William Harrison*, maybe? At the very least, see what's out there and why these ships are abandoned."

Mattis frowned at the thermal camera. There was a lot of heat around—a *lot* more than he would have expected for abandoned hulks. And how did they get so close together? "I don't think," he said, carefully, "that they were abandoned. Look at the heat signatures, still hot. I think this was the assault fleet that was supposed to come through. We just… blew it up."

"Whoa." Yim's voice was quiet. "Well, I hope so. That's a good start for revenge."

Something didn't sit right. That wasn't what they were here to do. "Vengeance might be righteous, but it's a spiral of suffering," said Mattis, staring out at the broken fleet of ships. "It eats you up from the inside, replacing rational thought with emotions. With anger. Anger is a motivator, but its aim is imprecise; it leads you eagerly down paths you should not

tread. It trades power for accuracy. And what we need right now is precision."

Blair sobbed quietly in the corner. "But what about my kids?" she asked, her voice cracking. Mattis didn't have an answer for her. Nobody did.

"We need to think about this," said Yim, quietly. "Take action. Bold but precise. Cold as ice. Absolutely reptilian."

"Reptilian," Mattis echoed, nodding thoughtfully. "That's perfect. Exactly what I want."

Yim leaned over his console. "I'll show this to the rest of the crew, and hopefully they'll turn their opinions around. I think being flung into a future timeline *might* help convince them that, you know, maybe we all need to work together."

"I hope so," said Mattis, staring out at the debris field, all those ruined ships. He could see the USS *William Harrison* floating in space beside them, ready to get the job done. To make the bastards pay. To take the war to Spectre.

They had so much to do, and so little time to do it. "Bring up the data we took from Reardon's salvaged computer," he said. "I want to know what we can get off it. Captain Spears died for this information. The least we can do is put it to use."

"Aye, Captain," said Yim. He paused. "Aye, Admiral." And he launched himself into his work.

Mattis stared at the main view screen at the ruined debris, and he began to draw up a plan of action. They would need to discover where and *when* they were. They would have to salvage the local debris, see what could be found. They would have to see what was really on that salvaged computer, and put it to whatever use they could.

They would have to get the crew on their side, and they would have to deal with the grief that would haunt them all.

But if all went well, then this time—this time they could seize the initiative. With a bit of luck, it might well finally be time to take the fight to Spectre on his home territory. Assuming Spectre even came from the future. It was troubling how little he still knew about the man. But now, at least, he was on the offensive.

And it felt good.

It was time to get to work.

Epilogue

Lone Star Bar
Los Alamos v2.0
Tiberius System

Elroy Mattis watched the news, his face glued to the TV screen in mute horror. Everyone at the bar, every drunk, every vacationer, everyone who had eyes and ears was watching. Everyone except baby Jack.

“We don’t even know what happened,” said the newscaster, obviously fumbling with a tablet and looking away for a moment. “Uhh, Johnny, can you check the feed again—thanks.” Then back to the camera. “Obviously, this is an unprecedented and disturbing development. The, uh… folks, I don’t know what to tell you. The teleprompter is normally—well it’s normally updated from the ground, but as you can clearly see… there is no ground anymore.”

Rocks. Molten magma. Ruined ships. Boiled gasses. The broken remains of Earth, slowly spreading out and expanding, all focused around a flat, two dimensional portal in space. Flickering, the portal winked like an eye, and then disappeared.

“I say again,” said the newsreader, his face grave. “This is not a test. Not a prank. What you are seeing is live footage from the Sol system… these images are coming to you direct from Z-space, and have not been modified in any—” the guy stumbled over his words, a profound crack appearing in his otherwise professional demeanor. “In a-any way.”

Someone coughed softly in the background. There must have been a hundred people crammed into the *Lone Star Bar*, filling it to capacity, all of them staring at the tiny screen. He could have heard a pin drop. Someone whispered, “no. No.” The silence was broken by another person vomiting.

“We have not received anything from those who were on the surface,” said the newscaster. “Not… even beacons.”

Elroy had expected the newly sworn in President Jameson to give a speech. He had expected… *someone* to give a speech. It always happened after every major calamity. Pearl Harbor, 9/11, the Sino-American war, the attack on Friendship Station, the Battle of Earth… there were always politicians, there had always been words to comfort, words to inspire, words to reassure.

All he could see this time, though, was a scared newscaster, a scrolling marquee that had yet to be updated with the true scope of the disaster and therefore showed only inane bullshit, and more planetary debris than he had ever seen or imagined.

He bounced baby Jack softly. An automatic reflex at this point.

What did this mean? Was Mattis okay? What about everyone in orbit, or… nearby?

Things had changed. That much he knew. Things… had changed.

A hand touched his shoulder. Reflexively, he looked to see who it was. A middle aged man with a grey beard, and a long scar across his face, wearing a sharply tailored suit. He was missing his left ear and his beard was speckled with salt and paper.

“My name is John Smith, CIA,” he said, eyes flicking to the TV and the stuttering newsreader there, then back to Elroy. “Come with me. Watching the replays won’t help.”

“I know,” said Elroy. For some reason—some strange reason he could not understand—he got off his stool and followed the guy away from the TV, away from the crowds. “So it’s true? Earth is gone?”

“It is. And now I need you to help me stop it.”

Elroy shook his head at the absolute insanity of that statement. He brushed the temporal logic aside and asked, “What does that have to do with me?”

“Everything,” said Smith. He led Elroy out of the bar and down the street. “I knew your husband. Chuck trusted me. I hope you can grow to trust me too.”

Elroy didn’t know this man, but if Smith was going to harm him, he could have done so already. “Sure. Okay.”

Smith held out his hand, as though to shake, and Elroy could see it was a prosthetic. “Shake on it.”

Elroy awkwardly juggled Jack into his other hand, then stuck out his hand. A brief electric shock passed into him. “Ow!” He scowled. “Hey,

what’s the big deal?”

“It’s important,” said Smith, “to make sure that it was really you I was talking to. Not a clone. Not a nanobot drone of Spectre’s. You.”

That was some kind of scan? Elroy didn’t understand what was going on. “Why? What do you mean?”

Smith smiled ever so slightly. “I mean,” he said, “that you and I are going to save Earth… and stop something like this from ever happening again.”

“But ... but how can someone like me save Earth?” Elroy waved at the holographic viewscreen projecting from the building on the corner showing news coverage of the gaping, shimmering hole that used to be Earth. “It's already gone. And I'm just a guy with a dead husband and now, apparently, a dead father-in-law.” He'd seen the Caernarvon disappear into the maelstrom. No one could come back from that. Not even his war-hero father-in-law.

Smith pulled him along, gently but firmly. “I can't give you all the details out in public like this. But—” he looked both ways down the street, and, apparently satisfied they were sufficiently isolated, leaned in to Elroy's ear. “I know who Spectre is. Finally.”

Elroy had heard enough horrifying details about Spectre from his father-in-law to know this was big. Huge. No-one knew who this sociopath really was. But he still couldn’t wrap his mind around what the hell it had to do with *him*, but struggled for a way to say it politely. “What the hell does that have to do with me?”

Smith’s smile flattened into something more determined. More resolved. For just the briefest of flashes, Elroy thought he saw … triumph. But then it was gone and Smith pushed him into the backseat of a waiting car. “Because you're a Mattis. Come on, let's get moving.”

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